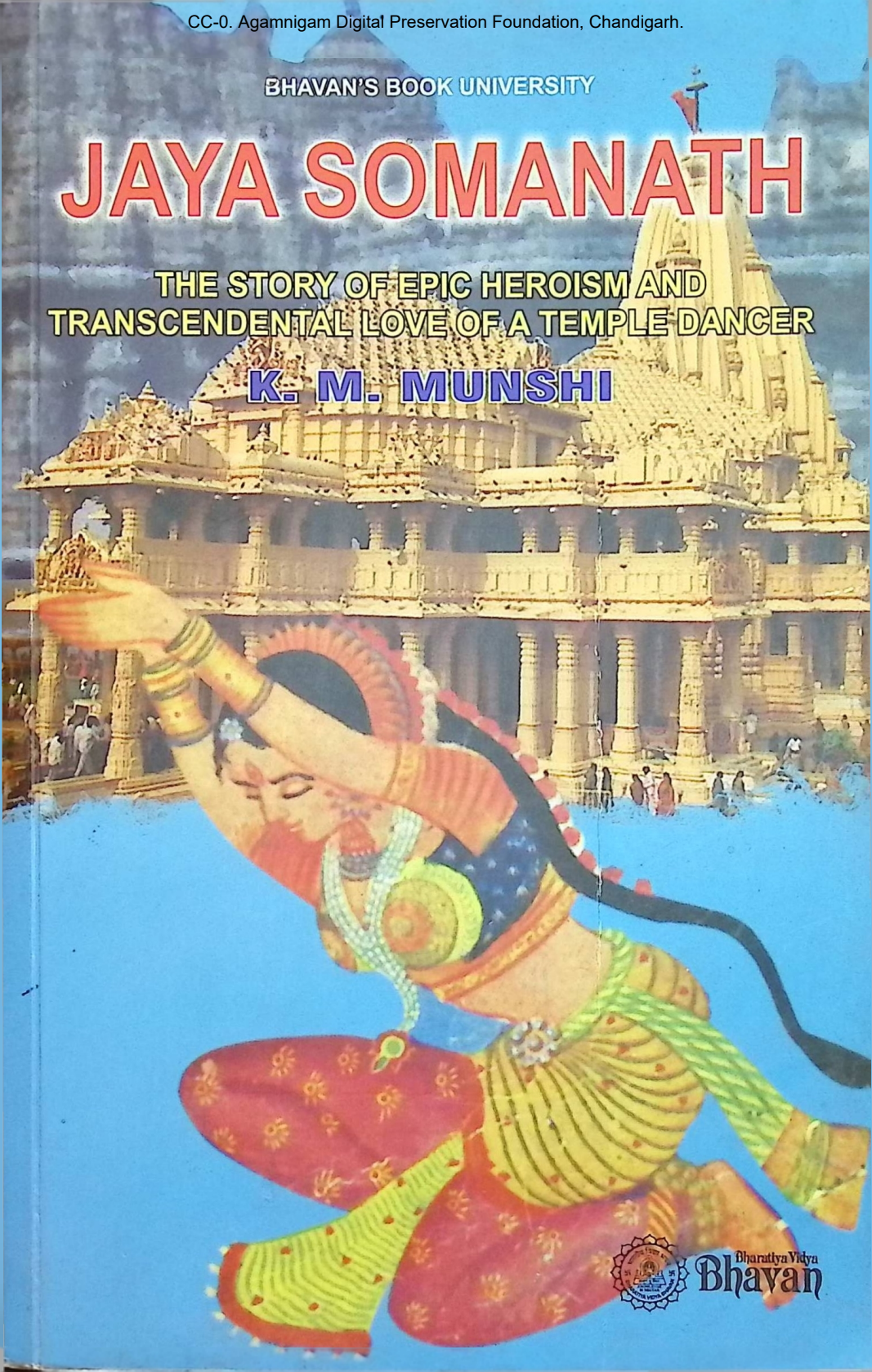


BHAVAN'S BOOK UNIVERSITY

JAYA SOMANATH

THE STORY OF EPIC HEROISM AND
TRANSCENDENTAL LOVE OF A TEMPLE DANCER

K. M. MUNSHI



Bharatiya Vidya
Bhavan

Let noble thoughts come to us from every side

- Rg Veda I - 89-i

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by

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*The Story of Epic Heroism and Transcendental
Love of a Temple Dancer*

K. M. MUNSHI

*Translated From Original Gujarati
by*

H. M. Patel, I.C.S. (RETD.)



2018

BHARATIYA VIDYA BHAVAN

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KULAPATI'S PREFACE

The Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan—that Institute of Indian Culture in Bombay—needed a Book University, a series of books which, if read, would serve the purpose of providing higher education. Particular emphasis, however, was to be put on such literature as revealed the deeper impulsions of India. As a first step, it was decided to bring out in English 100 books, 50 of which were to be taken in hand, almost at once.

It is our intention to publish the books we select, not only in English but also in the following Indian languages: Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam.

This scheme, involving the publication of 900 volumes, requires ample funds and an all-India organisation. The Bhavan is exerting its utmost to supply them.

The objectives for which the Bhavan stands are the reintegration of Indian culture in the light of modern knowledge and to suit our present-day needs and the resuscitation of its fundamental values in their pristine vigour.

Let me make our goal more explicit:

We seek the dignity of man, which necessarily implies the creation of social conditions which would

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JAYA SOMANATH

allow him freedom to evolve along the lines of his own temperament and capacities; we seek the harmony of individual efforts and social relations, not in any makeshift way, but within the framework of the Moral Order; we seek the creative art of life, by the alchemy of which human limitations are progressively transmuted, so that man may become the instrument of God, and is able to see Him in all and all in Him.

The world, we feel, is too much with us. Nothing would uplift or inspire us so much as the beauty and aspiration which such books can teach.

In this *series*, therefore, the literature of India, ancient and modern, will be published in a form easily accessible to all. Books in other literatures of the world, if they illustrate the principles we stand for, will also be included.

This common pool of literature, it is hoped, will enable the reader, eastern or western, to understand and appreciate currents of world thought, as also the movements of the mind in India, which though they flow through different linguistic channels, have a common urge and aspiration.

Fittingly, the Book University's first venture is the *Mahabharata*, summarised by one of the greatest living Indians, C. Rajagopalachari; the second work is on a section of it, the *Gita*, by H. V. Divatia, an eminent jurist and a student of philosophy. Centuries ago, it was proclaimed of the *Mahabharata*: "What is not in it, is nowhere." After twenty-five centuries, we can use the same words about it. He who knows

KULAPATI'S PREFACE

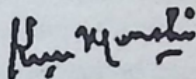
VII

it not, knows not the heights and depths of the soul; he misses the trials and tragedy and the beauty and grandeur of life.

The *Mahabharata* is not a mere epic: it is a romance, telling the tale of heroic men and women and of some who were divine; it is a whole literature in itself, containing a code of life, a philosophy of social and ethical relations, and speculative thought on human problems that is hard to rival: but, above all, it has for its core the *Gita*, which is, as the world is beginning to find out, the noblest of scriptures and the grandest of sagas in which the climax is reached in the wondrous Apocalypse in the Eleventh Canto.

Through such books alone the harmonies underlying true culture, I am convinced, will one day reconcile the disorders of modern life.

I thank all those who have helped to make this new branch of the Bhavan's activity successful.



New Delhi
1, Queen Victoria Road,
October 3, 1951.

PUBLISHERS' NOTE

Jaya Somanath, one of the novels written in Gujarati by Kulapati Munshi, deals with the story of the epic heroism and transcendental love of a temple dancer. This historical romance was translated into English by Shri H. M. Patel, I.C.S. (Retd.). The entire novel as translated was serialised in the *Bhavan's Journal*. The novel is now being brought out in book form for the benefit of a wider readership.

Jaya Somanath is a courageous work of art depicting the mortal crisis through which Gujarat passed when Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni attacked and destroyed the thrice-sacred temple of Somanath. It is a moving and fascinating account of the crusade which Gujarat fought to defend its honour and save its soul. The fusion of the struggle between the spirit and the lust, the heroic patriotism locked in mortal combat with the ruthless invader, the symbolic undertones of Munshiji's narrative and the undying appeal of the theme invest this novel with a character all its own.

The most striking feature of the book is the sustained atmosphere of national resistance to the invader—its fury, gusto and grandeur. The dances of Chaula which provide the prologue and epilogue to this drama softens its otherwise unrelieved heroic tone.

The colourful descriptions of the shrine of Somanath and the historic interpretation of the unequal struggle between the quixotic heroism of the Indian rulers and the ruthlessness of the invader, Mahmud—one of the greatest military geniuses of history—are some of the finest word-pictures in any modern Indian language.

The cover design is based on the classic illustration of Chauladevi by the eminent artist, Padmashri Ravishankar Raval, to whom our thanks are due.

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THE PILGRIMS

IT was the eleventh day of the month of *Kartik* in the year 1082 of the Vikramaditya Era (A. D. 1024), the most sacred day in the year.

They came in an uninterrupted flood—the pilgrims. They were arriving at the shrine of Lord Somanath, the Lord of the Three Worlds in the holy city of Prabhas, as if attracted by a magnet.

Some pilgrims came from Delwada, some from the port of Veraval, others by road from Junagadh. Some were happy; some unhappy; some fit and strong; others ailing and feeble; some lame and some crippled; some on foot and some by cart; some on horseback, some in chariots, some riding camels and a few perched on elephants.

There were some pilgrims, who sang devotional songs, some played music to the accompaniment of the *Sarangi*, drums and cymbals.

There were some who were wealthy, each accompanied by a bodyguard. Some had saved money all their life to have the *darshan* of Lord Somanath; some had taken a

vow of voluntary poverty; some so poor that they had to make their way by begging.

There were some who had come to offer thanks to the deity for the boons which had been given to them; some with the intention of giving up worldly life; some for acquiring wealth or for business; some to gain religious merit by getting rid of their sins.

They came in thousands, their only object being to offer worship to Lord Somanath.

As the pilgrims arrived, they found places to rest, sleep and cook their meals, outside the walls of the town of Prabhas, under a tree, or in the shade of a house, or inside a *Dharmashala*.

All the pilgrims looked upon the shrine as the principal abode of Lord Shankar and their eyes were filled with joy at the sight of the thousands of flags flying on temple tops and when their gaze finally rested upon the golden dome crowning the temple of Lord Somanath, they felt they were on the way to salvation.

They continued to come, each proclaiming his arrival at the main gate of the temple with their shouts "Jaya Somanath"—"Victory unto Lord of the Moon."

II

The temple of Somanath was neither big nor located in a big city; yet everyone felt that it was the home of gods. Though not glamorous as Amaravati, the city of gods, centuries of faith had made it the doorway to heaven.

THE PILGRIMS

3

Tall, well-built and fearful *kapaalas* had camped on the cremation ground outside the fort of the little town of Prabhas. Their bodies were besmeared with ash. A garland of human skulls was their only adornment. They ate human flesh and drank heady wines.

Inside the fort of Prabhas, there were rest-houses—*dharmashalas*—on both sides of the road, in which men of means found accommodation.

To the left of the main road lived the servants of the shrine, and to the right, the watchmen and the trackers. A little further, towards the shrine, several wells were built on the roadside which supplied fresh water to the pilgrims.

Then came the market square where traders displayed for sale the best variety of high artistic products, brought from different parts of the world—pots and pans of brass and copper, silks, gold embroidered cloth and choice ornaments of different workmanship. The Gujarati bankers sat in their shops cross-legged, rubbing their bellies, ready to lend money at exorbitant interest and grow rich.

On two sides of the square were houses of higher caste families. Beyond the square lived the Brahmins, with some two thousand students engaged in the study of the *Vedas* and *Shastras* and practice of religious austerities to secure ultimate salvation.

The inner fort was 20 ft. in height and 6 ft. in depth. On either side of the fort were shops where everything required for worship was sold.

In the centre was the temple of Ganesh—the god of good auspices—said to be founded by King Yayati.

On both sides of the temple were beautiful gardens. Water was provided by two canals from the river Hiranya.

Beyond, to the right was the temple of Bhairav, in which the *Kapaalas* and other *sadhus* worshipped the Lord with offerings of meat and wine. It was said that on the day before Deepavali, the dark night of *Aswin*, human sacrifices were offered there. No pilgrim ventured near this temple, but in order not to offend the deity, men of faith, controlling their horror, made their obeisance from a distance.

Through the gate of the garden on the left was the shrine dedicated to Tripurasundari. Around this temple there were several smaller temples dedicated to Her under other names, goddess Kali, Kumari, Kapali, Chamunda and others.

The temple of Tripurasundari enjoyed great popularity. Many great devotees, adopting female garb and feminine gestures, worshipped the goddess day and night, as the goddess gave salvation only to women.

The first ten days of the month of *Aswin* were spent at the shrine of Tripurasundari; the days being sacred to the Mother Goddess, the shrine would then become the centre of worship and those seeking salvation would come and discarding caste, creed or position in life, join the mysterious rites.

III

Opposite the temple of Ganesh was the gateway to the main temple. Along the road on both sides stood beautifully carved columns bearing lights; on the top of each was placed the figure of a bull. On its balcony were installed drummers who sounded big drums to announce the time by day and night, hour to hour.

Beyond the pillars to the right was the *Chandrakund* — a pool sacred to the Moon-God. It was believed that anyone who bathed in it would rid himself of diseases.

As one proceeded on the road between the two rows of lights, he would come to the steps leading to the dance hall and enter *nritya mandap* through which one had to pass to reach the sanctum.

In the dance hall was a large elephant sculptured in black marble with God Indra, depicted as coming to offer worship to Lord Somanath.

The hall was large and impressive; five thousand worshippers could pray at one time in it. It had forty-eight columns of marble. On every part of this hall, right up to the dome, artistic murals had been painted by artists from different countries of the world.

Facing the entrance of the inner shrine was Nandi, a large bull made of brass, the favourite vehicle of the Lord. Devout pilgrims offered homage to it by touching its tail.

In the innermost sanctum was the idol of Lord Somanath, the Lord of the Three Worlds.

2.

THE TEMPLE DANCER

THE Brahmins attached to the temple, as they piloted the pilgrims, thus narrated how Lord Somanath became manifest in Prabhas.

When the world first came into being, there were created Narayan and Narayani, Primaeval Man and Woman. Then from the navel of Narayan grew a lotus of thousand petals, each one of them shining as the ray of the Sun.

From the lotus of light came Brahma—Hiranya Garbha—who asked the question: "Whose son am I?" He spent centuries, wandering all over the creation, seeking an answer to this question.

At last, he began a severe penance of indefinite duration. At long last, Lord Vishnu appeared before him and replied to the question: "I am the Creator of the world. It is through me you are born."

Unable to bear this insult, Brahma engaged Vishnu in a fearsome fight. It was when this fight was going on between the two gods that there emerged a *Jyotirlinga* of ineffable radiance.

THE TEMPLE DANCER

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Immediately, Vishnu took the form of *Varaha* (Boar) and Brahma, of *Hans* (Swan). Both moved down into the heart of the earth and high up above the heaven to locate the precise whereabouts of this *Jyotirlinga*.

Ultimately they found it in Prabhas where a temple of gold was constructed before the *Satya Yug*, the Age of Truth.

In the early days of the creation the Moon-God gave light all through the night and every day of the year. But the god was not fair to all his 27 wives. It was Rohini alone whom he loved and loved passionately.

The remaining 26 of his wives, whom he ignored, complained to their father Daksha Prajapati about the behaviour of their spouse.

Daksha, moved to anger by his son-in-law's behaviour, cursed the Moon-God: "May you be consumed to extinction."

At this curse the people of the three worlds were in distress. They could not bear the idea of spending nights without the cooling light of the moon.

The Moon-God, finding himself progressively declining because of the curse of his father-in-law, came to the *Jyotirlinga* in Prabhas and worshipped for years until Lord Shankar, pleased at his devotion, stopped his progressive decline. The Lord blessed the Moon that he would decline for fifteen days and be restored to his luminous self during the remaining fifteen days of the month. This boon of the great Lord made the gods and *rishis* happy.

For the favour done to him, the Moon-God constructed a golden temple for the Lord, as also the *Chandrakund*; and that is how the *Jyotirlinga* came to be known as Somanath—Lord of the Moon-God.

Thousands of years went by. Ravana of the ten heads, King of Lanka, anxious to acquire the kingdom of the world, offered worship at this shrine. In his desire to please the Lord, Ravana instead of worshipping Lord Somanath with lotuses, cut off one head of his after the other and laid them before Him. When he was about to chop off his tenth head, the merciful Lord restored his nine heads and gave him the boon which made him the conqueror of the world.

As a mark of gratitude, Ravana had a silver temple constructed for the Lord on the spot.

Again ages went by. The all-powerful amongst the Yadavas, Sri Krishna, came to the shrine accompanied by his wives to offer worship to the Lord. Pleased with his devotion, Lord Somanath bestowed upon him the title of "The Best Among Men." As a token of his gratitude, Sri Krishna raised a temple of sandalwood for the Lord.

Centuries later, the Maheshwari kings of Vallabhipur got the shrine reconstructed in stone. It was said that when the temple was constructed, the Lord of the Three Worlds Himself appeared at its consecration, when heavenly dancers danced before Him.

II

The temple dancers continuously danced in the *Nritya Mandap*, dance hall, in front of the image of Lord Shiva.

THE TEMPLE DANCER

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Surrounding the temple, there was a *pradakshana marg*, the prescribed route on which the pilgrims went round the temple ritually. There were three small gates leading out of this *marg*. One of these doors led to the Pashupat *Math*, the monastery where Gang Sarvagna, the all-knowing, lived with his disciples.

Gang Sarvagna was the head of the Pashupat sect established by Lakulesh, who was an incarnation of Lord Shankar himself.

Gang Sarvagna was invariably called "all-knowing" because of his great learning. His reputation had spread throughout the world, and his disciples sang his praises from Kashmir to Kanyakumari. Rulers came from different parts of the world and fell at his feet. His smallest wish was fulfilled by the devout as if it was the command of Lord Somanath Himself. He had acquired a position in the religious life of the country which was difficult for the *rishis* to achieve.

The second gate opened into a small square, which had another gate leading to the sea.

To the west of the enclosure, in the centre of which the shrine was situated, there was another gate leading to the enclosure surrounded by a wall in which some three to four hundred temple dancers lived.

Some were from Gujarat. They worshipped God with soft-toned songs sung with feeling.

Some came from the north and spoke in a language which few could understand. They placated the Lord by means of melodies and songs of their land.

Some came from yet further north; they were tall, fair and bright; their voice, however, was harsh, and their singing lacked the charm that was to be found in others.

Yet others came from the south; slightly darkish in colour they had flat noses. They danced beautifully and sang sweetly in a language which not many could understand.

All these women had been dedicated to the service of the Lord in their childhood. Their only duty in life was to worship Him through songs and dances.

Day and night they spent their time in dressing up attractively and in learning and teaching singing and dancing. They also instructed selected men in these arts.

III

In this enclosure, one house was set apart from the rest. It was small but distinctive.

In the front yard of the house, a young girl was lying on her stomach on a cot under the shade of a tree. Resting her face in her hands, she kept time by striking her outstretched legs against the cot on which she lay. She had just woken up from her afternoon sleep.

Her hair was black. Although it was not combed and straightened out, it covered her entire back, reaching down to her knees, and as her feet beat impatiently against the cot, it flew about merrily.

THE TEMPLE DANCER

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Her neck was so graceful that the sight of it was enough to make many hearts beat fast.

She was eighteen years old, but had the figure of a girl of fifteen. Her face had the sweetness and simplicity of an eight-year-old child; her bright eyes had an innate earnestness.

Wrinkles on her forehead kept forming and disappearing. Why did her mother not turn up in time? Why was Sarvagna detaining her mother so long? What did the old man mean by it?

She lifted her face and turned it towards the setting sun.

As the rays of the sun fell softly upon the central dome, it assumed the colour of molten gold. In its construction, the sculptors had poured out all skill and devotion to give it a shape and magnificence all its own. It stood so high that it seemed to be touching the very sky.

As Chaula, for that was the name of the girl, gazed at it, her beautiful eyes grew meditative. It was Mount Kailas to her, the home of the Lord. From her early childhood, she used to go right up to the gallery which surrounded the dome and dance there to the music of the waves of the sea.

In a little while, the sun would set, thought Chaula, and then the *aarati* would begin. When that was over, her great moment would arrive to which she had looked forward since she was a child, and for which her mother and her grandmother had prepared her with care.

Ever since she grew up, she had devoted all her efforts day and night upon acquiring the high degree of skill and excellence which she was to display on this occasion. This was the moment for which she had been living.

In order to please Lord Somanath, three hundred temple dancers, including her mother, had been dancing before the Lord day and night. But she was going to be different from them all, said Chaula to herself. No one else had as strong and shapely legs as she had, nor had a waist as supple as hers. The great Gang Sarvagna, the pontiff of the Pashupat sect himself, had taken a special interest in her. Many a time, as she danced, she found her feet failing her, but every time Lord Somanath had given her strength to carry on.

Many a time, the Lord Himself appeared before her in her dreams and told her: "You are my dancer." With her every breath, she was devoted to Him. She had no other interest in life than to dance in front of the Lord every day of her life, and to die dancing in front of Him, with "Jaya Somanath" ringing in her ears; she would like to bring her life to a beautiful end. Her imagination was incapable of going beyond this point.

IV

According to the age-old custom of the temple's school of dancing, every 18-year-old dancer who was adjudged the most proficient in 18 types of dances, 12 schools of acting, and 7 styles of singing, was given a right to dance before the shrine for the first time at the time of offering

THE TEMPLE DANCER

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prayers on the eleventh day of Kartik. At that great and auspicious moment, the young flower would blossom, and be offered to the Lord.

Chaula was not in the least concerned about what would happen to her after this one great moment. The future may be bleak: today she would dance and Lord Somanath Himself would be pleased with her. Had she not worshipped Him, with all her soul every day of her short life with the sole object of winning His approval?

To fulfil her destiny of the chosen bride of the Lord, she had acquired supreme control over all her limbs and gestures; she had controlled her diet and her sleep, and had kept away from any man's touch. She was sure that Lord Somanath would be so pleased with her dancing that He would not wish to see anyone else dance before Him on every *ekadashi* day and every *shivaratni*, sacred to the Lord.

How often had she gone in the deserted hall before dawn to worship and pray before the Lord! And every time her prayer had been that she should achieve perfection in her art such as no one before had ever achieved.

She was sure that her Lord would grant her request. Tonight, therefore, when she danced, her dance would be superb, her dream would be realised, and her beloved Lord Shankar would be pleased with her.

Once again she looked at the dome of the temple. For a long time she kept gazing at the flag. She had always

been fascinated with this flag flying on the dome at that height.

Her heart loved everything that danced. The flying flag, the movement of the waves, gentle or stormy, and the swaying branches of trees, invariably aroused in her heart a feeling of affection; she felt she was one with them; to her, rhythm and dance were reflection of the cosmic dance of the Lord, of the rhythm of creation and destruction.

Chaula knew only two persons in this world; God Nataraj, the Supreme Dancer and she herself, His bride-to-be. She was barely conscious of the rest of the world; if it was there at all, it was only something dim and shadowy.

"Chaula, get up. Why are you still lying down?" — Chaula heard herself being called. It was the voice of her mother, Ganga.

Her face brightened. She raised herself a little and turned round—a common enough movement, but there was grace even in the way in which her neck and shoulders moved.

"Come, get up," repeated Ganga, "do you know who has come to see you dance?"

"But have you brought my clothes?"

"Of course, here they are," replied Ganga with a smile.

Ganga had already crossed the age of fifty. A few strands of silver hair testified to it. But, even at that age, there was grace in her walk; her voice was melodious, but authoritative, as befitted the head of the temple dancers.

THE TEMPLE DANCER

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Her eyes did not sparkle like Chaula's, but they were beautiful and grave. At this moment, they beamed with happiness; they were still able to express various shades of emotion even at that age.

As soon as Chaula saw the clothes and ornaments in her mother's hands, she ran to her. She looked at them as if her whole life depended on them. Her eyes remained rivetted upon them.

"Yes," said Ganga, "these are the things which 'he' had arranged to obtain for you from various countries."

Her mother always referred to Gang Sarvagna not by name, but in the third person—as was the customary way with wives when referring to their husbands. Chaula was always intrigued and delighted by this habit of her mother.

"Really, is this true?" Chaula dutifully enquired.

"Yes, but do you know who has come today?"

"No."

"The King of Gujarat, Maharaja Bheemdev."

"Well, so what?" rejoined Chaula indifferently, as she began putting on a necklace.

"So, you do not think much of the monarch of the land of Gujarat!" remarked her mother fondly.

"I am indifferent to all except my Lord Somanath."

"Don't tell me that even I do not count," said her mother, patting her cheek playfully.

"Oh mother! How can I ever do without you?" replied Chaula putting her arms around her mother and holding her tightly to herself.

The whole of the dancers' residential area was dominated by Chaula's mother, just as before her, it had been by Chaula's grandmother.

All the dancers stood in great awe of Ganga. There was nothing she did not know about the arts of singing and dancing. She was able unerringly to pick out the slightest mistake in tone or rhythm and never hesitated to punish severely whoever was at fault. It was she who had the authority to assign houses in this area to the dancers, to distribute clothes and ornaments among them, and to permit them to go out. Everything, in fact, concerning the lives of the dancers was controlled by her.

Ganga was still capable of moving about with the freedom, abandon and spirit of a young girl of twenty-five. Whenever she danced—and she still danced—she had the capacity to hold the attention of the pilgrims, rendering them speechless with admiration.

It was said that God Somanath was so pleased with her that once He gave *darshan* of His living Self to her—a story which the dancers in her charge did not believe. The more malicious of them suggested a totally different reason as the source of her power and supremacy.

She alone among all the dancers was able to approach Gang Sarvagna and make him do what she liked. Many

THE TEMPLE DANCER

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elderly people were fond of narrating legendary tales of the two when they were young. But no one was in a position to say what truth there was in these legends.

About one fact, however, there could be no doubt: that every Monday night, when Ganga danced in the temple, the venerable Gang Sarvagna was always present. The malicious had been trying their best for years to find out any similarity between Chaula's features and Gang Sarvagna's, and strained to prove a similarity where none existed.

Just as her mother had watched carefully over her development as a dancer, so had Ganga been preparing Chaula to step into her shoes. She had taught the girl everything that she knew herself, and she was more beautiful even than she herself was at her age.

Ganga had arranged that the principal disciple of Gang Sarvagna, Shivarashi, took an interest in the girl. And it was her greatest wish that when her own powers waned, Chaula should be ready to take control of the dancers' colony and the heart of Shivarashi.

Sometimes, however, she felt a little unsure of herself, particularly when she found that Chaula was not practical. She certainly danced and sang exceedingly well and had also devoted herself wholly and solely to Lord Somanath. Ganga herself had taught the dancers that those whose lives had been dedicated to the Lord must think of Him only; but she herself had found that it was most difficult to practise what she preached. She was not at all sure that Chaula,

when she grew older and more mature, would behave as a practical woman of the world.

Chaula's test was in a way a test for Ganga also. Today for the first time Chaula would be dancing before the Lord at the time of the main worship. She had been preparing her for this occasion all these years.

The previous year Gang Sarvagna had suggested that Chaula might dance on the sacred day, but Ganga had succeeded in putting it off on the ground that Chaula was still young and her training not complete.

3.

THE HEART OF AN ASCETIC

LIGHTS flickered in thousands of small clay vessels placed in the niches of the columns outside the temple and on the walls of the fort.

As the time for offering worship to Lord Somanath drew near, a large and growing crowd gathered in the *Nritya Mandap* (the dance hall).

The hall was also lit up by hundreds of small clay vessels placed on the niches of the pillars; the mural paintings on the ceilings and the walls came to life. The bells hanging from the ceilings by golden chains, rang a joyous note. A steady stream of people came in, shouting "Jaya Somanath", and with folded hands, bowed low before the sanctum.

Jewelled lanterns lit up the sanctum, in the middle of which was the creation—old image of Somanath, covered with flowers and *bael* leaves. A golden vessel suspended from the ceiling by a golden chain, kept water dripping upon it all the time. Brahmins, learned in all the four *Vedas*, were offering worship, reciting appropriate *mantras*.

Suddenly, from the gallery of the main gate came the beat of drums and the music of the fifes. The people inside the *Nritya Mandap* began to jostle each other. About fifteen stalwart *sadhus* entered the hall and pushed their way through the crowd to the front of the sanctum.

By way of calling the assembly to order, one of the *sadhus* blew a powerful conch; its blast reverberated through the hall. There was complete silence and every eye turned towards the entrance.

An old man in his sixties, tall and fair, draped in tiger skin, with his body besmeared with ashes, came into the hall. His long gray beard was tied in a knot; his snowwhite sacred thread was suspended from his left shoulder. Everyone stood with folded hands. Some fell at his feet. One and all shouted "Victory unto Gang, the All-Knowing."

The old man's high forehead, indicative of his great learning, was marked by three lines of sandalwood paste. His eyes were clear, grave and compassionate. He kept looking all around as if he was searching for someone.

As the high-priest came slowly, everyone present realised that he was in the presence of someone whose life had been dedicated to the service of Lord Somanath and for propagating the message of Lakulesh, the *avataar* of Lord Shankar.

Twenty-seven years ago, when Gang Sarvagna became the head of the monastery, the cult of Pashupat was on the

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decline. Today, learned men, rulers and common people from all over the country vied with one another in accepting him as the supreme teacher of the cult. Due to his influence, people's faith in Somanath had once again been restored throughout the world.

Gang Sarvagna was followed by three men. One of them was his principal disciple, Shivarashi, dressed exactly as his *guru*, but looking more worldly than learned.

The second man was strong and tall; his big, dark eyes reflected the light of the flickering oil lamps. His face created the impression of frankness, boldness and reliability. Although he looked tired, his manner of walking indicated a person of royal status. The impression was confirmed by his high turban, the long sword hanging by his side and the large bow suspended from his left shoulder. Seeing him, one was reminded of a lion about to spring.

The third man, small in size, was impressive. His smooth skin, bright eyes and small well-formed fingers suggested his high descent. At first sight one would think that he was very young, almost a child, but his firm lips lent power to his face and removed the first impression. He too carried a sword, but the way he held it showed that he was not very fond of carrying weapons.

Gang Sarvagna, the All-Knowing, slowly walked towards the door of the sanctum, responding easily to the greetings of the pilgrims, blessing them with outstretched

hands. When he came near the sanctum, he prostrated himself before the deity and offered worship.

Then, Gang Sarvagna, whom even kings considered a privilege to worship, rose and stood before the Lord, his head bowed and his hands folded in silent meditation. As he offered prayers, it was clear that his heart was full of devotion, that he was completely unconscious of everything around him except the presence of the Lord. Then he took from the hands of a Brahmin standing nearby, a tray which had been prepared for the *aarati*.

For fourteen years, every evening without fail, Gang Sarvagna had thus offered worship to the Lord in the presence of large crowds of pilgrims, as thousand bells in Prabhas pealed simultaneously and hundreds of drums sounded a triumphant note.

When he had finished the *aarati*, he shouted, "Victory unto Lord Somanath." His call was echoed by those standing around him; from them, it was taken up by others in the hall of worship, and then by the pilgrims standing outside the hall. For one moment nothing was heard in the town of Prabhas but the worshipful shouts of "Victory unto Lord Somanath."

After the *aarati* was over, Gang Sarvagna came out of the sanctum and sat on a gold-encrusted, low stool. By his side sat Shivarashi. His two guests sat on a carpet embroidered in gold.

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“Bheemdev, my son,” said Gang Sarvagna to the guest with the princely bearing, “so, in the end, the ruler of Dhara had given the villages to you.”

Bheemdev moved a little nearer to Gang Sarvagna and urged that he should be entrusted with the reconstruction of the temple at his own expense.

Gang Sarvagna smiled and said, “As you wish and as the Lord Somanath wills. When will you come again?”

“Next year. What do you say?” Bheemdev asked his companion, his Prime Minister Vimal.

“Of course”, replied the handsome companion of the King with a smile. “By that time, if that be the wish of Adishwar, the noble king would have conquered Malwa.”

For a moment Gang Sarvagna was serious. The mention of the name of Adishwar, the Tirthankar, venerated by the Jains, to which community Vimal belonged, linked with the possibility of conflict with Malwa, was not to his taste. He changed the subject by calling for the dance.

Silence prevailed. All eyes turned towards the special passage which had been marked off by ropes leading from the southern gate to the dance hall.

First came two torch-bearers, followed by Ganga, dressed in gorgeous clothes. Behind her was a young woman, veiled and draped in white, followed by six female dancers. Last came the musicians. All of them walked right up to the

centre of the hall and prostrated themselves before the Lord.

Gang Sarvagna's eyes were dimmed with affection as they fell upon the young woman dressed in white.

Bheemdev asked Shivarashi in a whisper, "Is that the new dancer going to dance this evening?" Shivarashi nodded his head.

"Who is she? What is her name?" enquired Minister Vimal. Shivarashi gave no reply.

Ganga began her song in praise of the Lord. Her voice in spite of her age was sweet, but in that sweetness was the sincerity of a true devotee. But while she sang praises of God Shankar, she hoped that the song would please Gang, the All-Knowing. Her eyes rested more often on Gang Sarvagna than upon the Lord. She really sang for him, and as usual, Gang Sarvagna listened to her, with his eyes half-closed. Along with all his other branches of learning, he had made a deep study of the art of music, and no one's singing had yet appeared to him to be superior to Ganga's.

The song came to an end. Ganga's eyes turned towards Gang Sarvagna to read in his eyes, whether he was pleased or not. Half opening his eyes, Gang Sarvagna responded by a smile of appreciation. Then, almost simultaneously, the eyes of both turned towards the veiled young woman in white. Gang Sarvagna gently whispered to her, "Now begin your dance".

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As he said this, there came before his eyes one unforgettable dawn nineteen years ago. The intervening time disappeared. He could see before his eyes Arbudachal, the sacred Mount where he had offered severe penance for six months in search of self-purification. He still had vivid recollection of the joy he felt on his return to Prabhas, to join his devotees and disciples.

On that day,—he recalled—, he could not sleep even after midnight. It seemed as if someone was calling him from a distance. He took his staff and went out of the monastery.

As he approached the seashore, he saw in the waning light of the stars a beautiful young woman emerging from the waves. She appeared to be someone not of this world, ethereal.

He had never been able to forget that moment. He had asked: "Who is it?" and the woman had replied simply: "It is I."

He had recognised her without difficulty. She was the daughter of the head of the temple dancers. She was the one who by her wonderful singing made devotional songs in praise of Shiva, so immensely satisfying. He knew that she was a temple dancer, and utterly devoted to the worship of the Lord, also one who had regarded His service as part of her life.

Gang Sarvagna had stopped in front of her; he had not been able to suppress the joy he felt as he enquired, "What are you doing here?"

"I had my bath just now. I want to dance before the Lord."

"At this time? What special blessings do you seek from the Lord?"

She looked down shyly. Even after nineteen years, Ganga remembered the scene vividly. "To be able to serve God and you" was her gentle reply.

And all of a sudden there arose in his ascetic heart an emotion which he could not understand. It seemed to him as if God was ordering him to accept her.

As the light of the stars became more dim and the gentle music of the waves more intoxicating, while the fresh breeze of the early dawn was giving refreshing life to all, they were in each other's arms. Then happened what was still fresh in his memory.

Gang Sarvagna woke up from this daydream and said in his natural voice, "It is time for the dance." The very next moment his heart began to beat fast, and anxiously.

Young Chaula, her face covered with her white scarf, was sitting modestly with her eyes fixed on the ground. Her heart was beating fast as never before, and its throbs echoed in her ears.

She became conscious of Gang Sarvagna's order, followed by her mother's direction to get up. She stood up, found her feet trembling. How would she be able to lift her legs? Then her mind became blank.

4.

THE BRIDE OF THE LORD

CHAULA'S mind was blank. Her heart was overflowing with faith. Lord Somanath was there in front of her. He would never forsake her.

She fixed her eyes on the image of the Lord; she bowed before Him, her God, her Lord, her Master.

She heard her mother asking her to obtain the blessings of Gang Sarvagna.

Her feet were no longer trembling. She went up to Gang Sarvagna, bowed and touched his feet. Gang smiled. That was his way of blessing.

Chaula saw Shivarashi sitting beside Gang Sarvagna and also noticed the two young men sitting by his side whom she did not know. They appeared to be fascinated with her. She slipped off her white scarf and stood for a moment like a goddess emerging from a white lotus. The crowd looked on, transfixed.

Her small, shapely feet tinkled with bells. Above her gold embroidered skirt, like a *shikhar* of some artistic

temple, rose her lovely body—slender waist, gently sloping belly, bust hidden by bejewelled bodice, blue-veined neck, innocent little face.

Chaula's face did not bear the impressiveness of a goddess, but it was a kind of face, gentle like a child's which one sees only in dreams. At this moment, however, she was totally unconscious of her charms. She was not even conscious of the large assembly looking at her.

Her eyes were fixed on the image of the Lord whom she had been worshipping for many years in the single-minded hope of winning His favour. She felt that her Lord was waiting for her, was impatient for her dance, was eager to congratulate her. The very thought brought life into her frozen feet. With swift movements of her feet, she sailed towards the entrance of the sanctum; that was the signal for the music to begin.

She was no longer the temple dancer, Chaula, but the Spouse of the Lord. The temple was the high Himalayas. This was not the image of her Lord, but the Lord Himself. She felt she was not a temple dancer, but His Spouse Parvati herself wooing him.

Her feet, her hands, her waist and her neck moved in rhythm and harmony in the way Goddess Parvati's would have moved when she offered herself to Lord Shankar. Her face bore the imprint of intense devotion. Her eyes were full of intensity. She paid homage first by standing, then bending from the waist, then kneeling. With graceful movements of her hands, she poured flowers, as if in a stream, over the

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image. Every limb of hers indicated her eagerness to be merged in the Lord.

Then she changed the nature of the worship. Her hands and feet slackened in their movement. Her eyes too showed signs of fatigue, her face became clouded with sadness. The music became softer, the rhythm slower. Gradually all enthusiasm vanished from her face. There was helplessness in her eyes. She looked like the image of misery.

Chaula was not just acting. She was transformed into Parvati herself, and like her, bent on winning her consort. And what if she failed? By appropriate *mudras*, she expressed the fear of the Lord rejecting her.

Suddenly she changed her mood. In her imagination, she saw Kamdev, the god of Love, coming towards her. Her gesture became very vigorous. Her feet moved forward in hope.

Startled, she half-bent her body and looked at the image with expectant eyes; she moved back. Kamdev's arrow had found its mark and hit the Lord, and with rhythmic steps she walked slowly, bashfully, gracefully towards the Lord, as if He was pleased with her at last.

Under the emotional strain caused by separation from the Lord, she—as Parvati—took some steps backward, one step after another, slowly and shyly. A gentle smile played on her lips; her face bore an enigmatic expression. Striving to hide her breasts with the help of her scarf which

she carried on her shoulder, she moved backwards. A sense of pride, a sense of victory, pervaded her whole being, her dance.

Suddenly she stopped, startled, frightened.

The dancers behind her resumed their singing, describing what the Lord felt:

“Though I am God and All-powerful, why has My strength left me? Why have I allowed myself to be blinded by love? Why am I behaving so strangely today?

“All-knowing as I am, if I am prompted to surrender to the lure of a woman, is it any wonder that ordinary mortals should behave improperly when moved by that desire?”

Gang Sarvagna, losing control over himself joined in the song.

“The Almighty Shankar sat down, his legs crossed in the lotus shape. Thus did he conquer desire, for how can the omnipotent God allow Himself to succumb to desire? Never?”

Chaula trembled under the stress of emotion. The ringing of her anklets suggested fear and embarrassment.

The song went on. The Lord opened His third eye and with a blaze, the god of Love was reduced to ashes.

Chaula shuddered, placed her hands on her eyes.

Having lost her ally, the god of Love, she felt lost; there was tragedy in her movements and on her face. The

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tears she shed for her friend turned into tears of helplessness. She knew that he would never be able to win the Lord.

The drums began to beat falteringly. Chaula's feet stumbled. Her hands fell by her side helplessly, while her eyes were full of tears. She was disconsolable.

The mood of Parvati had seized Chaula. As she expressed her mood in dance, expression and gestures, her eyes were fixed on the image of the Lord. Slowly her expression hardened; her feet became steadier. Her dance movements indicated a dignified woman undergoing severe penance.

She sat down in the yogic pose. Her eyes were focussed on the tip of her nose, and slowly as the drums began to beat softer, she lost herself in meditation.

With a sudden movement, she expressed that her meditation was interrupted. An old Brahmin had come to her. By dance, she indicated her welcome to the holy guest. With appropriate gestures, she washed his feet. She bowed low before her guest, her anklets on her feet beating a gentle welcome. She listened attentively to her guest. The singing went on:

"Parvati, what a fool are you! You have chosen to reject suitors like God Indra and the conquerors of the world, and prefer to love an ascetic shunned by the world.

"Is this proper behaviour on your part?

"Here you are, blessed with eyes like lotuses, and there he is, ugly with his three eyes.

"Here you are with a face which the moon may well envy and there is Shiva with his five mouths.

"Your beautiful hair, well-braided, shines like a serpent. And look at his wildly matted hair.

"Your body is covered with fragrant paste; he is smeared with the ashes from a funeral pyre.

"Here you are, clad in gorgeous silk, and there is Shiva, clad in elephant skin.

"Look at your beautiful ornaments and look at the snakes which he wears."

As the song went on, there was scorn on the face of Chaula. By the time the lines of the song came to this part of the story, her anklets started jingling furiously; her hands moved rapidly to express her anger.

The drums also beat furiously.

Sparks began to fly from the angry eyes of Parvati. She moved round the Brahmin in wrath—the place where he was supposed to be sitting—her feet keeping time fast and furious.

She looked at the Brahmin disdainfully; her movements, her eyes, her face, all expressed contempt. She bent slowly.

Suddenly Chaula looked up in wild surprise. The Brahmin was transformed into the Lord Himself. The drums sounded like thunder in the sky. The music stopped for a moment.

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Chaula was so carried away by her dance that she saw the Lord emerging out of the *linga*. Her dance indicated the delight as it raced in her veins. Her heart was full of joy. She was borne on the waves of speed and rhythm.

Chaula forgot that she was playing a part. In her excited imagination, she saw her Beloved standing in front of her. She forgot everything, except that the aim of her life had been achieved. She forgot all that she had learnt of dance and rhythm. She could breathe with difficulty. Overwhelmed by emotion, her eyes grew wide and splendidous.

Her feet barely touched the ground; they were flying. Her hands did not merely gesticulate with grace; they were like creepers, bending and swaying in a fierce wind. Her face shone with an ethereal brightness.

Carried away by impulsive joy, she went all round the image of the Lord; she embraced the Nandi, the mount of the Lord. She felt as if she was embracing the Lord. She felt herself kissed, and she was shy.

As the speed of the dance increased, so did the tempo of the music. Her anklets kept time with her fast-beating heart. She lost all control over herself. Her dance became a love song. Overwhelmed by unbearable flood of joy, she sunk on the floor.

The music of the drums stopped immediately. The assembly almost ceased to breathe. Gang Sarvagna wiped tears of joy and pride from his eyes.

Then followed a scene never seen during the last twenty-seven years. Venerable Gang Sarvagna, the All-knowing, stood up, went swiftly to where Chaula was lying and picked her up. He carried her to the door of the sanctum and addressed God Shiva: "Lord, accept this girl. As long as Chaula lives, she will dance before You on every *Shivaratri* night, sacred to You."

As if he was placing a gift at His feet, Gang Sarvagna placed her on the ground before the image.

Chaula slowly opened her eyes. It was the supreme moment of her life. She appeared to be seeing before her eyes the great matted-haired God.

"I am yours, yours, in this life and in every other," she murmured as she lost consciousness.

5.

THE GODS ARE ANGRY

SUDDENLY there was an uproar among the pilgrims. Someone, it seemed, was forcing his way to come to the front of the crowd. Gang, the All-Knowing, was surprised. He had never seen such discourteous behaviour in his presence. Who dared to disturb the peace of the temple when the ceremony was going on?

The assembly made way for a man who looked like one demented. In a tired and hoarse voice, he called out, "Victory to Bheemdev Maharaj."

Startled, King Bheemdev got up from his seat and came forward to ascertain who had greeted him in this manner within the temple precincts.

"Whoever he may be, let him come forward," ordered Gang Sarvagna.

The intruder, his eyes dust-laden, moved forward, swaying from one side to the other out of sheer exhaustion. He threw himself at the feet of Gang Sarvagna and offered salutation in the prescribed manner: "I bow to God Shiva."

"We bow to God Shiva," responded Gang Sarvagna.
 "Who are you, my son?"

"But this is Mulo Rathod!" interjected King Bheemdev.

"Bapu," said Mulo as he raised himself and faced Bheemdev with folded hands, "Please hurry up. Mehtaji is dying. Please hurry, hurry."

"Mehtaji?" You mean Damodar? What has happened? Where is he?" enquired Minister Vimal, shaking Mulo by the shoulder. "Where have you come from? Mehtaji has gone to Sapaldaksha. Is that not so?"

Overtired though he was, Mulo protested: "Bapu, I am telling you the truth. He is not at Sapaldaksha. He is here, at the gate of Prabhas—dying. For ten days neither of us has eaten nor slept. We have tired out four of the fastest of our camels. Lord, please come immediately, while there is time; otherwise you will not see Mehtaji alive. And then there will be great trouble."

Bheemdev was puzzled. His minister Damodar Mehta had gone to negotiate a treaty of peace with the King of Sapaldaksha. Mulo was his confidential messenger. What could bring him to Prabhas in such a hurry and how did Damodar Mehta come to be in such a precarious condition?

"Come, Bapu."

"Very well. Let us go." It was now Minister Vimal's turn to be impatient.

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Gang Sarvagna had, by now, gauged the situation correctly. Addressing his disciple, Shivarashi, he said, "I feel that this is a warning to us of some danger. Go with these people and bring Damodar to my residence. I am going there immediately."

Taking two *sadhus* with him, Shivarashi went with Bheemdev, Vimal and Mulo, to look for Damodar. Two torch-bearers ran in front of them to show the way.

Gang Sarvagna was disturbed in his mind. Turning towards God Somanath, he asked a mute question: "Lord of Creation, what can this mean?" Finding no reply, he decided to place his worries humbly at His feet.

After a time, the search-party gathered at Gang Sarvagna's residence. When Gang came, Damodar Mehta lay semi-conscious in a bed. He was about forty years of age. At the moment his handsome face was pale and his eyes swollen. Minister Vimal was stroking his head gently and a disciple of Sarvagna was massaging his feet with oil. Bheemdev was staring at Damodar impatiently.

Gang Sarvagna took his seat a little away, his legs crossed and Shivarashi by his side. In one corner, another disciple was getting a medicine ready, while in another corner Mulo sat dozing.

"Gurudev, do you think Damodar will die?" This was perhaps the tenth time that Bheemdev asked this question.

"No. He will not die. I promise you." Having given this assurance, Gang Sarvagna stood up, and taking the medicine which his disciple had been preparing, poured it into Damodar Mehta's mouth.

Within a few moments, they heard a sigh escape the ailing Mehta's lifeless lips. He opened his eyes a little and then wider as he began to recognise the people surrounding him. Immediately Bheemdev called out affectionately, "Damodar!"

Damodar was by now able to identify Bheemdev. "Bapu, is that really you?" he exclaimed and suddenly sitting up, embraced Bheemdev.

"Mehta!"

"Give Damodar a cushion," said Sarvagna.

Damodar tried to fall at Sarvagna's feet as soon as he realised who he was. Sarvagna made Damodar recline comfortably against the cushion.

"Damodar, now please tell the whole story calmly. We are not in a hurry," advised Sarvagna.

"Venerable Master," began Damodar, joining his palms in a pleasant, cultured voice. He was suddenly overcome by a fit of coughing, and when it subsided, he resumed.

"Bapu," he spoke with difficulty. "What are you doing here? Go to Patan. Go immediately."

"But why?" asked Bheemdev, greatly surprised.

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"Why? Because the Hammir of Garjan is on his way to attack us."

"Are you in your senses?" cried Sarvagna and Bheemdev together.

"His troops are moving with the speed of locusts. They will arrive here by tomorrow."

"Here?" asked Sarvagna.

"Yes. He has plundered Thaneshwar and has destroyed Kanauj. Now he is on his way to destroy the abode of Lord Somanath? There is not a moment to be lost. Go, my lord, to the rescue of Gujarat."

"How long ago was it, do you think, that he left Garjan?"

"About a month ago. As soon as I heard of it, I decided to come and inform you. For the last ten days I have neither rested nor slept."

"Oh, so he is coming to destroy the Lord's home!" said Sarvagna surprised.

"Yes. He has sent word to Sapaldaksha that his troops should have free passage across this territory."

"How long will he take to arrive here?"

"Who can say? He and his large army have still to cross the desert."

"And do you really think that this monster will be able to lower the banner of the great Lord Shankar?" Sarvagna

laughed. "This arrogant man is not afraid even of God?" "This Hammir Mahaamada of Garjan is more terrible than the god of death himself."

"Well. Let him come. Lord Shankar, who destroyed the god of love with his third eye, is still powerful," remarked Sarvagna dryly. "Bheemdev, Damodar is right. You must go to your capital, Patan, forthwith and take steps for its protection."

"Master, I am ready. Garjan will learn a lesson when he faces the army of Patan. Mehta, how many men is this foreign invader bringing with him?"

"Who can say? Rumour has it that his army is composed of hundreds of thousands of soldiers."

"Whom God wishes to protect, who can harm?" exclaimed Gang Sarvagna. "Go ahead, may Lord Somanath always be with you."

"Gurudev, I am grateful to the great God Mahadev for giving me an opponent like the Hammir of Garjan to fight. Now you will see the valour of Bheem. Come, Vimal, let us get ready."

"Truth shall triumph in the end, my son," said Sarvagna. "Have faith in Lord Somanath. He will give you victory."

Bheemdev was excited at the prospect of the forthcoming war. He had not had much difficulty in displacing from the throne of Patan a father whose only interest was woman, and a brother who had neither ability nor personality.

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He had been about to invade Malwa and was confident that he would emerge victorious. His only regret was that there was no foe worthy of his mettle.

He had heard much about the Hammir or Garjan who was reported to have defeated the Rana of Lavakot, sacked Thaneshwar, and routed the forces of Kanauj. Never had anyone even dreamt that this ruler of Garjan, so far away from Bharat, would venture to cross the desert, and attack Gujarat.

Bheemdev was glad that the great God had given him this opportunity. What better service could he render to Lord Somanath than to punish this foreigner who was coming, determined to destroy this holiest of holy shrines in Bharat? Bheemdev was full of enthusiasm for the coming battle.

6.

VISION OF BEAUTY

IT was already past midnight. Vimal had almost finished the preparations for leaving Patan. There was still some time before the auspicious time for departure. Bheemdev was himself ready fully armed. While waiting for the others, he walked impatiently backwards and forwards like a caged lion.

Suddenly a thought struck him. Why not spend the intervening time in the temple and seek the blessings of Lord Somanath?

Leaving Sarvagna's quarters, he went into the shrine. The crowd had already dispersed, only two or three men sat in a corner yawning and chatting. Most of the lamps had been extinguished.

He entered the hall of worship slowly and found that there was no one there.

Moonlight was streaming into the hall and across the row of pillars as if filtering through tree-tops. His mind, full of the thoughts of war, became quiet.

VISION OF BEAUTY

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As he came near the sanctum in the dim light of a few oil lamps, his eyes fell upon a figure standing in the shadow of a pillar. He was startled and stood motionless.

The man who stood had a terrifying aspect. Long loose hair, grey and dirty, covered his head. He wore a necklace of skulls and anklets of bones, while in his hand he carried the thigh bone of an animal. Both his nostrils had been pierced. His upper lip was cut, laying bare his gruesome teeth.

Bheem was frightened. At first he thought that the Lord Bhairav himself—the Lord in his destructive aspect—had come to protect the shrine of Somanath. But a closer look convinced him that it was no god but a *kapali*, a follower of the dreaded cult of Bhairav. Bheemdev felt like running away, but his feet stood rooted to the ground.

Bheemdev saw that the red eyes of the *kapali* were staring with an unnatural intensity at an object lying in the sanctum.

Bheemdev strained his eyes to recognise what the object was. At first, he thought it was a heap of flowers, then he saw the outlines of a human body. As his eyes became accustomed to the darkness, he saw shapely shoulders and delicate hands. It suddenly dawned upon him that the figure was of Chaula, the temple dancer. She was offering her prayers with her forehead placed on the ground.

She was lying absolutely still. Was she dead? Bheemdev's heart missed a beat. Why was the *kapali* gazing at Chaula in this manner? He too stood absolutely still, his eyes fixed upon Chaula.

After a little while, Chaula moved her head. There was no doubt she was alive. Had the *kapali* brought her here? Was he waiting for her? Neither Bheemdev nor Chaula nor the *Kapali* moved until Chaula sat up and folded her hands in prayer.

Suddenly she jumped up. She laughed with joy as she struck the ground with her feet rhythmically a few times. Then in a playful affectionate voice, she muttered; "Lord, I am yours. I belong to you." She turned around, smiled with joy in her dancing eyes. She stepped out of the inner temple and moved swiftly southwards.

Bheemdev took a step backwards. The *kapali* hid himself behind the pillar. Instantly, the *kapali* followed her, hiding his movements by moving from one pillar to another.

Bheemdev forgot both the invader from Garjan and the Lord for whose worship he had come! His heart was bewitched by the dancer. He followed the *kapali*. Why was the *kapali* following Chaula? Was it by arrangement? If so, why was he trying to hide himself?

He had heard that the *kapalis* often kidnapped young girls in order to sacrifice them in the temple of Tripurasundari or satisfy God Bhairav with their blood. Surely there could

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be no such attempt on the person of a dancer of Lord Somanath!

The *kapali* kept following Chaula with Bheemdev behind him.

Chaula went through the gate leading to the sea. Why was she going towards the sea at this time of the night, asked Bheemdev to himself. He hid himself for a moment behind the gate, while the *kapali* stationed himself in the shadow of a tree close to the steps leading down to the sea.

Chaula ran down the steps, and then for an instant stood on the lowest step. She then began to remove her clothes rapidly. She had not the least suspicion that she was being watched attentively by two men, and quite unself-conscious, she stood as God had made her, looking like a goddess emerging from the sea, in the soft light of the moon against the background of the waves.

Bheemdev was overwhelmed by so perfect a beauty and fell madly in love with Chaula.

Chaula jumped into the sea, and was soon enjoying herself in a playful mood. She untied her hair and moved her hands softly upon her cheeks, then on her breasts, and then on her belly. She dived into the water and after remaining invisible for a moment, came up floating.

The rays of the moon seemed to penetrate her through the shimmering foam of the waves. As she floated, the sea seemed to play with her as if she was a shell of perfect beauty, throwing her up and down gently and affectionately.

Bheemdev had seen many women, good and bad, beautiful, attractive and unattractive, but never had he imagined that he would see anyone who would so stun him with her beauty. He was surely dreaming. The moon, the waves, the gentle breeze and the incredible beauty of the scene created an extraordinary background.

The passion with which he fell in love with the lovely girl glowed in his eyes.

When Chaula had enough of floating, she swam shorewards and in a few moments stood upright in shallow water. She shook herself dry, tied up her hair into a knot and stepped on to shore. Bheem stood hypnotised.

Suddenly the romantic atmosphere was shattered. A black figure emerged from the shadows. The terrible *kapali*, with his necklace of skulls, went right up to Chaula and stood before her.

The young woman, so full of joy a moment earlier, was terrified on seeing the frightful figure of the *kapali* standing so close to her. The deep silence, broken only by the sound of the waves, was pierced by her screams.

Bheemdev came out of his waking dream and reacted quickly. With one big jump, he covered the distance that separated him from the *kapali*. He caught hold of his neck and pressed his throat with his strong well-muscled arms. The *kapali*, who had stretched out his hands, failed to seize his victim.

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To avoid being suffocated, the *kapali* turned and twisted and tried to bite his captor's hands. But Bheem was in a fury. He squeezed the *kapali's* throat. The *kapali* put forth all his strength to push him away; at last he caught hold of Bheem's arms. A struggle followed, each trying to throw the other to the ground. Then both fen into the water.

As the fight grew desperate, Bheem made one supreme effort to throw the *kapali* and pressed his head in the water. *Kapali's* efforts suddenly ceased. He was dead, drowned.

7.

BHEEMDEV LEAVES HIS HEART BEHIND

BHEEMDEV waded out of the water. He looked at Chaula who was still lying on the ground unconscious, looking like a faded white flower.

As if under a spell, Bheemdev picked her up and held her smooth cold body against his own. He realised how deeply he loved her. She was only a child, an adolescent, having only just begun to shape the outline of her body. Every part of her body was indeed the perfect creation of the supreme sculptor—God.

She trembled with cold. Bheemdev pressed her to himself with tenderness. He pressed his face to hers; her cold cheek soothed his excitement. He covered Chaula with her clothes and putting her head in his lap, tried to revive her.

After a while, Chaula's eyelids fluttered and as she opened her eyes still thinking of the *kapali*, she screamed and jumped away. As she did so, her clothes fell to the ground.

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Bheemdev sought to reassure her and told her not to be frightened.

Chaula, suddenly realising that she was naked, was overwhelmed with embarrassment. She hurriedly picked up her clothes and began dressing herself as best as she could.

"Where is that horrible man?" Chaula asked. She looked around her in fright.

"I have sent that scoundrel to his ancestors," said Bheem with a loud laugh.

"You killed him? Good heavens! But who are you?"

"Have you not yet recognised me? I am Bheemdev of Patan," said Bheemdev dryly.

"Really! Not the great Bheemdev?" exclaimed Chaula who was still attempting not too successfully to cover herself.

"Had I not killed him, he would have carried you away."

"But my lord, did you lift me and bring me up here even though I was not dressed?"

"What was I to do? When you fainted away, did you have any clothes on?" asked Bheemdev with a laugh. He was amused at Chaula's concern about her clothes. Chaula was attracted by his frankness and his free laughter.

"Lord, forget what you saw. I am not an ordinary dancer. I belong to God Shiva."

"That is why I picked up the flower which had been presented to Shiva. I will now turn my back. Dress yourself."

Bheemdev turned around, laughing. Chaula dressed herself hurriedly. Between the fear of the *kapali* and the embarrassment of her nakedness, she had not regained her composure.

"May I turn around now?" asked Bheemdev.

"Yes."

"It was good thing that I was here, otherwise"

"Heaven knows what will happen now that he is dead. How did you have the courage to touch so terrible a man? God saved me. He did not forget His humble dancer."

Bheemdev laughed again. Chaula came closer and said, "You are very brave."

"Since you say so," rejoined Bheem.

"I would like to go now. How much longer will you be staying here?"

"Indeed, God guided my steps here to save you. I am going away immediately."

"Where are you going at this time of night?"

"Patan."

"But I thought you came only this morning. Why are you going away so quickly?" Chaula laughed for the first

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time. Bheem felt that the laughter increased her beauty a thousandfold.

"If you promise that you will not tell anyone, I will tell you."

"I will keep your secret."

"The Turkish Hammir is coming to attack us and I am proceeding to fight him."

"Come back soon victorious. May Lord Shiva protect you."

"Will you wait for me?" asked Bheemdev.

"When you return, I shall be at the feet of Lord Mahadev," she answered gravely.

Bheemdev felt as if he had been slapped in the face. He was rebuffed and his pride was hurt. He looked at the girl, but he found in her eyes only gratitude, and in her charming smile, no emotion other than devotion to God. He sighed deeply.

"Well, my Vimal must be waiting for me. Let me take you to your house."

Chaula turned, gave a parting look at the waters of the sea and shuddered at the thought of what she had just gone through.

At the entrance to the dancers' residential area, Chaula bade goodbye to Bheemdev by joining her palms. He stood rooted to the spot until she completely disappeared from

sight. He had had the good fortune of witnessing a beauty such as he had never dreamt of witnessing. The woman at whose feet he felt he could place all his life, and who alone could give a meaning to his whole life, had gone out of it! But he must forget her. He had to go straight to the battlefield and accept the challenge of the invader. He felt sad that he might not return alive to her.

He cast an eye first towards the temple, then slowly lifted his gaze to the banner which flew over the temple. The Lord Mahadev was with him. He had the blessings of Gang Sarvagna, the All-Knowing. Chaula would surely wait for him now. He would come back and then would meet her again.

Before his imagination could proceed further, he shut his eyes, closed his lips firmly and moved towards the temple. After offering his prayers to the Lord, he went out to meet Vimal, who was waiting for him. Before setting out, he went to say goodbye to Damodar.

"Bapu", said Damodar, "as soon as I am well enough, I will come and join you. But do not underestimate this invader. He is like a forest on fire: it will not be easy to stop him."

"Do not worry. We shall defeat him," Bheemdev reassured him.

"I am sure you will."

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"But tell me, how do you think he is going to cross the desert?" asked Vimal who felt that Damodar's apprehensions were baseless.

"I will lead our army against the invader so that our lord and master can look after Patan."

Damodar shook his head and said, "Do not take such a risk. Face him with all your forces. My Lord, please take heed of what I say."

"Do not worry. I shall take every care," Bheemdev reassured Damodar.

After again obtaining Gang Sarvagna's blessings, he set out on his journey accompanied by Vimal. As his camel took him away from Somanath, he felt that he was tied by an almost invisible thread to the little dancer. His desire was to be where his love was, but his duty directed him towards the battlefield. His heart remained where Chaula was.

8.

AN OMINOUS PORTENT

ONE of the temple attendants woke up early in the morning as usual and walked towards the steps leading to the sea. He was singing devotional songs and chewing a twig of babul tree to cleanse his teeth.

The moon had almost set, and the moonlight had all but merged into the light of the dawn. Slowly he went down the steps, threw away the twig and bent down to splash water on his face.

Suddenly his eyes fell upon a thing lying in the shallow water. He let out a fearful scream and ran for his life, loudly invoking Lord Somanath.

Two women came, yawning and chatting, carrying empty pots on their heads. As they slowly went down the steps and stepped into the water, their feet struck something hard. Both looked down at the thing and, in horror at what they saw, threw away their pots and ran away screaming loudly.

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In a little while, the temple grounds were in an uproar. Everyone talked of only one thing; everyone instinctively felt that some unimaginable disaster would overtake them all.

Something had happened that had never happened before; something indicating a terrible catastrophe that was overtaking the world; something which indicated the wrath of God.

A disciple of Bhairava was lying dead in the waters, his lifeless face, with its wide open eyes and split mouth, making him look fierce and hideous in death.

This news spread like wildfire from the seashore to the abode of Gang Sarvagna, from there to the temples, to the schools, to the residential quarters of the dancers, everywhere.

From every quarter, men and women came out with their faces betraying fear and anxiety; they, one and all, prayed to Lord Somanath for protection. But they could not suppress their curiosity and moved towards the place where the corpse was lying.

The rumour assumed wild and yet wilder proportions, It was not one dead man lying in the sea; there were several. It spread among the pilgrims, who started praying for protection from the calamity which, they were certain, would descend upon them all.

The womenfolk sought protection for their beloved

children by pledging themselves to observe vows and penances of varied nature.

Terror ruled the minds of everyone, young and old; and they all prayed to God Shiva to protect them.

Devotees ran into the temple and, prostrating themselves before God, sought His forgiveness for whatever sins they might have committed. Those who had already taken their bath and performed their routine morning prayers began to offer worship again.

Some of the more terrified people began singing devotional songs in groups and sometimes to the accompaniment of musical instruments. Everyone was convinced that Lord Somanath alone would be able to save them from the calamity portended by the *kapali's* death.

It was with great difficulty that Shivarashi, the senior disciple of Gang Sarvagna, could get any sleep. But in a few moments, the noise around him had grown into such a volume that sleep became impossible.

When he was told as to what had happened, his instinctive reaction was to recite the chants known as the *Shiva Kavacha*, the 'Armour of Shiva', which had the magic quality of saving one from death.

When he went to the temple, he was taken aback by the size of the crowd that had assembled, anxiety and fear writ large upon the face of everyone. When he walked

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towards the steps that led to the sea, he managed to make his way through the crowd. In the light of the rising sun, he beheld the fearful face of the *kapali*, staring with lifeless wide open eyes at the flag flying on the top of the temple!

Shivarashi, like the rest of the people, concluded that a calamity was inevitably going to descend upon them all. For him, the calamity was concrete as he was aware of the news which Damodar had brought the previous evening.

Like everybody else, he too prayed for Shiva's protection.

Once he thought of going back to his room, but realised immediately what the effect of his withdrawal would be on the already frightened crowd of men and women in front of him. Only the deep study he had made of the holy books, his devoted services to his *guru* and the austere life he had led for the last 20 years came to his help. How could he run away, he who was destined to succeed Gang Sarvagna as the head of the great Pashupat sect?

His courage regained, he turned back and asked a disciple whom he saw standing nearby, to inform Gurudeva and then the camp of the *kapalis* on the funeral ground that Kank Yogeshwar, the head of the *kapalis*, had passed away.

When the crowd learned that the dead man was Kank Yogeshwar, their fears mounted, for he was the most

venerated of all *kapalis*. He was believed to be so powerful that God Bhairava himself remained in attendance on him.

The rumour had it that Yogeshwar had begun an ambitious ceremonial in order to see Lord Somanath face to face. He had also taken the vow that, should he succeed, he would offer to the God, in his fearful aspect of Bhairava, the blood of 108 beautiful young women.

Most people knew that he had been performing his ceremonials in the cremation ground at midnight. That, of all people, such a powerful man should die and in this manner, was in itself sufficient to strike terror in all hearts.

Shivarashi realised that he was now on his trial. If the crowd got the impression that he too was frightened, they would begin to think that he was not fit to succeed Gang Sarvagna as the head of the Pashupat sect. Having lived so long with his master, he knew how to conduct himself.

With some difficulty, he controlled his emotions and sought to console an old woman standing close to him, trembling with fear.

"What a terrible thing to happen?" said the old woman, her hands joined. "What will happen to the world, now that Kank Yogeshwar had departed from this world in this manner?"

"Why should you be afraid?" asked Shivarashi. "Everything will be all right with the grace of Lord Somanath."

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“But how can such a thing happen?” queried the old woman. “Is it not a sign of the Lord’s anger? Oh, Lord! What calamities will now befall us?”

Shivarashi involuntarily thought of the Hammir of Garjan. But getting control over himself he said: “Why are you afraid? Yogeshwar himself told me that the moment Lord Somanath reveals Himself to him, he would leave the world to stay in Kailasa, the abode of the Lord. This is not a sign of the Lord’s anger, but of His favour.”

With a show of courage, he went down the steps, stood near Yogeshwar’s corpse and, averting his gaze from its wide open eyes, began reciting the chant *Shiva Kavacha* (the Armour of Shiva). Though he was feeling that his heart would stop any moment, what kept him going was the knowledge that his *guru*, Gang Sarvagna, would soon arrive.

The crowd grew larger every moment. In their effort to conquer their fear, they continued to sing devotional songs in unison, as loudly as possible. That was the way, they thought, of bringing the gods to their rescue.

Soon the story set afloat by Shivarashi began to have its effect. It gave courage to the people. Not only was there no question of any calamity, Kank’s death was really a sign of heavenly favour!

By the time Gang, the All-Knowing, arrived on the scene, they began to get over their fright. His face when he

arrived was calm as ever. He recited the chant which Rishi Markandey composed when he sought the favour of the Lord when the God of Death had come to take him away.

The crowd gathered courage on seeing him and took up the refrain of the chant: *'If you have the protection of Lord Chandrasekhara (Shiva), what can the God of Death do to you?'*

Soon afterwards, a group of *kapalis* came singing strange and fearful songs, and took possession of Yogeshwar's corpse and placed flowers upon its eyes.

A funeral procession was soon organised. Thousands of people joined the procession up to the cremation ground. When Yogeshwar's followers initiated the fearful cremation rites peculiar to their sect, all dispersed, save Gang Sarvagna and his followers.

After the body of Yogeshwar was reduced to almost ashes, the *kapalis* collected his bones as sacred relics.

9.

THE CHAUHAN, FATHER AND SON

IT was midday when Ganga came back to her house. She found Chaula still asleep.

Chaula had a disturbed sleep. One dream followed another, sometimes terrifying, sometimes exhilarating. She was chased by the horrible disciples of Bhairav she found herself in the arms of Bheemdev enjoying a ride on the mouse, the traditional mount of Ganapati Gods and demons fought amongst themselves for her sake she found herself on the lap of Lord Shankar When Parvati, the divine Spouse of the Lord, protested, she danced on one foot. ... It was terrifying the way she was being carried away by the lipless follower of Bhairav on his shoulder.... Bheemdev came to her rescue riding a peacock, the mount of Lord Kartikeya. He embraced her and she was happy.... When the peacock flew away with all her clothes!

She woke up with a start recalling the events of the previous day; how she danced before the Lord Somanath;

how she had taken a dip in the sea in moonlight; how she had been lifted by Bheemdev. Her Lord saved her from a living death. What else could explain Bheemdev's timely arrival? She was surely the beloved bride of the Lord. She was still smiling when Ganga came.

"What on earth are you still doing!" exclaimed Ganga. "It is midday already and you are still in bed."

"But does it matter? I spent a sleepless night yesterday."

"But do you know what has happened?"

"How would I know if I was asleep?" asked Chaula with a smile. "What is the news you bring?"

"Kank Yogeshwar is dead."

"Who?"

"The *Guru* of the sect of *kapalis*. His corpse was found lying at the foot of the steps leading to the sea. And what a terrible sight it was! His wide open eyes and his fearful face!"

Ganga went on talking while she changed her clothes.

"Do you know that he had taken a vow to offer to the Lord the blood of 108 girls?"

As she said this her eyes fell on Chaula and saw how frightened she was. She asked "Why? Why, what is the matter, my dear?"

"Blood of little girls!" repeated Chaula. "Oh, my God!" she exclaimed and fainted away.

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Even after she regained consciousness, Chaula was in a confused state of mind. She kept on seeing before her eyes three figures chasing each other, Bheemdev, the *kapali* and the Muslim invader Hammir of Garjan. A strange fear took possession of her. She clung to Ganga who was sitting by her side.

"Mother! What will happen now?"

"What do you think is going to happen?"

"I fear that Yogeshwar's death would lead to a catastrophe."

"Nonsense! Nonsense!" exclaimed Ganga contemptuously. "I was not born yesterday and in all my life I have never seen anything that can be described as a major misfortune."

"Do you know it?" whispered Chaula in her mother's ear. "We are about to be invaded by the Hammir of Garjan."

"Hammir of Garjan! Who on earth is he?"

"I don't know."

"From whom did you hear about him?"

"I heard from somebody but that is not relevant."

"Of course, it is relevant. Yesterday you knew nothing. How did you discover this secret? Please tell me, from whom? Won't you tell me?" said Ganga persuasively.

Ganga loved her daughter so much that she could not avoid feeling jealous of the girl keeping to herself even her

innermost thoughts and feelings. It was her cherished hope that Chaula should fall in love with Shivarashi and was conspiring in every way to achieve her object; yet the very idea of Chaula giving her body and heart to anyone else was unbearable to her.

“Won’t you tell me?” Ganga repeated her question.

By nature Chaula was frank and straightforward. She could hide nothing from anyone, much less from her mother. She replied: “It was King Bheemdev of Patan who told me that the Hammir of Garjan was about to invade us.”

Chaula’s mind went back to the moonlight bath that she had the previous night and the mere recollection of it sent a shiver through her body.

Ganga hugged Chaula and said: “My darling little scoundrel, when did you arrange to meet Bheemdev?”

Chaula was only too anxious to narrate her experience. She hid her face against her mother’s breast, and laughing and crying in turns, described what had taken place the previous evening—the death of Yogeshwar and the meeting with Bheemdev. The only thing that she omitted to tell her mother was that when Bheemdev picked her up from the sea, she had no clothes on.

As Ganga listened to Chaula’s experience, an unreasoning fear gripped her. What could be more inauspicious than that Kank Yogeshwar should be killed because of Chaula? And was it not significant that Bheemdev

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had immediately thereafter to go to fight the invader from Garjan?

Ganga knew only one way of finding solutions for her troubles and she now had recourse to it. She went to Gang Sarvagna, taking Chaula with her.

Gang was just finishing his midday ceremonials. He had already offered worship and was repeating the sacred chant *Gayatri*. Today he found it difficult to concentrate his mind. Even while he was repeating the sacred chant aloud, the inner voice kept on asking him: "What's going to happen?" It was at this moment that Ganga along with Chaula entered his house by the backdoor, and went and sat in front of him.

Chaula looked at the broad forehead of Gang Sarvagna which had three-lined crescent-like mark in sandalwood paste. She wondered whether Gang Sarvagna was an ordinary human being or God Shankar himself. Many a time she had dreamt of Lord Somanath. He looked exactly like Gang. The Lord's magnificent beard was dressed in exactly the same way. Sometimes a doubt arose in her mind whether Gang was indeed the incarnation of the Lord; if he was, she would be the daughter of the Lord of Lords. Somehow she did not feel that this could be correct because Gang himself worshipped the Lord as well as His Spouse Parvati.

By the time Gang Sarvagna finished his prayers, Shivarashi arrived. As he prostrated himself before Gang,

he saw Chaula with the corner of his eyes and his face beamed with joy.

“Gurudev,” he said, “Chauhan chief Sajjan and his son Samant have come to meet you.”

“Yes, but Ganga has come to talk to me about something important. Let us first deal with her troubles”

Gang Sarvagna looked at Chaula with affection. He continued: “And Chaula had also come with her complaints My dear girl, you really were wonderful yesterday evening.”

Ganga and Chaula came forward and fell at Gang’s feet. “You are very kind,” murmured Chaula.

“Not my kindness,” interjected Gang Sarvagna, “but the grace of the Lord.”

“But, Chaula, really you were wonderful. How was I to know that you could dance so well? Ganga, now indeed your sun has set.”

“But, how wonderful that I should have to retire because of my daughter’s brilliance. Don’t you think so, Rashiji?” Shivarashi was about to reply in the affirmative but Gang Sarvagna did not let this conversation continue further.

“Well, Ganga, tell us why you have come?”

“For one thing, Chaula wanted to pay her respects to you.”

“And the other reason?”

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"The other reason is to tell you what Chaula has just told me. It is a terrible tale."

Chaula looked around and Gang understood.

"Shivarashi, please see that no one comes in."

"As Gurudev commands," said Shivarashi. He went out to give instructions and returned.

Ganga then gave Sarvagna the full account of what had taken place. As the story unfolded itself, Sarvagna's face became grave. Finally when she spoke of Kank Yogeshwar's death at the hands of Bheemdev, he touched his eyes with his finger and began to repeat the *mantra* seeking Lord Somanath's protection. Shivarashi was terrified. By the time Ganga had finished narrating what had happened, all of them sat transfixed.

With an effort Sarvagna reacquired possession of himself and said in a firm voice: "The fears and hopes of human beings are illusions. The Lord alone knows the truth. What we have to do is to seek His guidance and bow to His will. It is He who has willed through me the growth of this place during the last twenty years. So long as the trident of Lord Shiva protects us who could do any harm to us?"

Then his eyes became bright and he spoke as if inspired.

"Who shall harm the man whom the Lord protects? The moment the Hammir of Garjan tries to harm the Lord's shrine, he would cease to exist."

Then Gang turned his eyes towards the sky and for a moment sat silently in meditation. The faith of others in Gang Sarvagna and Lord Somanath was restored.

“Rashi, is not Sajjan Chauhan waiting outside? Lord Somanath must have sent him. Bring him in.”

Shivarashi went out at once and brought in Sajjan Chauhan and his son.

Sajjan Chauhan was a tall, handsome, long-haired, fiercelooking Rajput of about forty years of age. His son, a youth of twenty years, was the very image of his father. Both of them were armed identically, each carrying a sword and a shield. Both of them prostrated themselves at Gang’s feet. “We bow to Lord Shiva,” they mumbled.

Gang Sarvagna blessed them with ceremonial response: “To Lord Shiva, we bow,” and enquired whether they had arrived the previous evening.

“Yesterday, Gurudev,” replied Sajjan. “We were a little late in coming. We arrived here when the evening prayers had just begun, then we saw the dance.” As he said this, he looked towards Chaula.

“Yes, Chaula danced beautifully, didn’t she?” remarked Sarvagna.

As he said this, he turned towards Sajjan’s son, Samant, whose attention was concentrated on Chaula. Chaula’s beauty had evidently made a deep impression on the boy.

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Sarvagna then quietly resumed his talk with Sajjan and enquired after Ghogha Rana.

"He is well. He has sent you his deep regards and also this present." With these words Sajjan took out from his waist a beautiful diamond and held it in front of Gang Sarvagna.

"I am pleased that the head of the Chauhan family continues to be a staunch devotee of Lord Somanath."

"God Shankar is kind."

"Sajjan, God Shankar is very pleased with Ghogha Rana. His services are appreciated by God. When did you leave your home?"

"It is two months now since we left Ghoghagadh. After passing Sapaldaksha and Shrimal we travelled here *via* Chitod."

"And how many days would you take to complete your return journey?"

"About twenty-five days."

"No, that will not do. I am asking what is the minimum time you would take to get there, taking the shortest route, almost as the crow flies. You have to return immediately. The work that I wish to entrust to you involves some danger but it is God's work."

10.

THROUGH THE DESERT

SAJJAN thought for a while. "Even with the utmost speed I could not cover the distance to Ghoghagadh in less than twenty days," he said.

"Sajjan, fifteen days will not do? Do it in ten days; no, not even ten days but eight," replied Gang, the All-Knowing. "I know you, you are Ghogha Rana's grandson. You can ride a camel as swiftly as a bird flies in the air."

"Venerable Master, what do you wish me to do?"

"What can a humble person like me desire? I am here only to pass on to you the commands of Lord Somanath."

"What are they? Tell me. For the family of Ghogha Rana, any wish of the Lord is the command to be carried out loyally."

"Lord Somanath also holds your family in great affection. Sajjan, you select the swiftest and strongest riding camel from the temple stables, travel day and night, and convey to Ghogha Rana the message from Lord Somanath."

"And what is that, Gurudev?"

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"That the Muslim Hammir of Garjan is on his way to invade Somanath bent on destroying God's temple. Tell Ghogha Rana that because of his deep devotion extending over eighty long years, the Lord had conferred on him a privilege, a privilege which is rarely conferred. He has been appointed the defender of the temple of Somanath."

"We are indeed fortunate."

The eyes of Gang Sarvagna were bright and inspired as if he was conveying a command of Lord Somanath.

"Tell him that the invader must not enter the desert so long as there lives even one warrior in the family of Ghogha Rana. Tell him that it is God's wish that he must destroy every living enemy of His. The Lord blesses him and assures him that Ghogha Chauhan's fame will last so long as the Sun and the Moon endure."

Sajjan had been standing all this time in front of Gang Sarvagna with his head bowed, listening intently. He now spoke in a voice trembling with emotion, but with bold and firm eyes: "Master, you need fear nothing. So long as there lives on earth Ghogha Bapa's sons, grandsons and great-grandsons, no destroyer will be able to cross the desert."

"Well done, Chauhan, go and convey to Ghogha Rana the commands of the Lord."

"I shall reach there within fifteen days, but please look after Samant."

Samant looked reproachfully at his father. There were both anger and pain in his brave eyes. "Father," he protested,

"Lord Somanath's commands are meant for every son of Ghogha Chauhan. I am not a girl. I shall come with you."

Sarvagna slapped Samant's shoulder, as he said, "Well done! There speaks a true Chauhan! But supposing I require you here?"

Samant's face became a picture of disappointment. "Master, are there not local Rajputs to help you? A Chauhan of Ghoghagadh must defend Ghoghagadh. He must live and die in his own home. I must go."

Gang Sarvagna smiled encouragingly. "Sajjan, your son is as brave as can be. Take him with you. As long as there live Chauhans like him, *Dharma* will always triumph."

Samant bowed deeply with a thankful heart. Gang embraced him. "My child, so long as there are men like you, those who wish to destroy the cow, the Brahmin and the shrine, shall never succeed. Go, victory be yours."

"Master, wherever he may be, we shall destroy the enemy. Lord Somanath will triumph," said Sajjan Singh.

"Go, my son, and be victorious. Shivarashi, make preparations for their journey. See that they have our best riding camels."

"Master, do not worry. The route of the desert journey may be difficult for others. For us it is like highways."

"Do I not know that?"

Sajjan Chauhan and Samant took leave of Gang Sarvagna. As they left, Samant once again turned towards

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Chaula and found her beautiful admiring eyes fixed upon him. They seemed to convey a message; an inspiring tribute to his courage and an appeal to give his best.

This did not escape Gang Sarvagna. He said: "Sajjan, before you leave, both of you should offer worship to God Somanath. Chaula will herself give you the *prasad*."*

Samant's heart began to beat fast. The very idea that Chaula who had danced before God Somanath the previous evening, would herself come to give him the god's *prasad* excited him.

After a while, Samant and his father went to the temple; where they found Chaula waiting for them. They received the *prasad* from her hands reverently. Chaula touched their eyes and forehead with the holy water and the flower placed on the deity.

It was a moment of intense emotion for Samant. His heart beat fast. He could scarcely take his eyes from Chaula.

To his delight he heard her speak in a sweet voice. "Oh! I forgot to give you this special gift from the venerable Sarvagna." She held out the holy ashes in a small cup of gold. The father, overwhelmed with joy at this mark of the favour of the Lord applied them to his forehead proudly.

Samant, however, had other ideas. If he was to be sacrificed for the welfare of the shrine, why should Chaula not apply the holy ashes to his forehead. Trembling with emotion he held out his face to Chaula. Chaula recognised

* Sacred offerings made to the deity

the courage and devotion of the young Chauhan. She also sensed that he was attracted to her. Unhesitatingly she applied the holy ashes to his forehead.

"Come back soon. Come back victorious," she said.

"Assuredly," said Samant, with pride and confidence. He looked boldly into Chaula's beautiful eyes as if to retain a firm impress of her image in his memory. Then he turned away abruptly, his body filled with enthusiasm and confidence of a conquering hero.

Sajjan and Samant escorted by eight warriors took the shortest route to the desert. They had the best camels which the shrine had and the best camelman as the guide.

Sajjan did not know Saurashtra well. Once in the desert, however, he was at home; he was the king, as it were, of the desert. He knew every part of it thoroughly and it was child's play for him to cross the desert from Kutch to Ghoghagadh.

He was an expert camel rider. He could spend day and night on its back. He could make it run at its fastest pace. He loved camels and the camels loved him. To him they were not animals. He could talk to them and understand their troubles.

Their progress was rapid. Accompanied by Samant and the guide, Sajjan Chauhan went ahead of the escort. By the time the escorting group arrived at the desert after crossing the forest of Saurashtra, it was already midday. Like a man who, standing on the seashore, sees the waves

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of the sea touch the horizon, Sajjan's eyes looked at the vast expanse of sand touching the horizon.

The glare was intense. It was difficult to see or to keep his eyes open. He knew that the route across the desert from this side was short but full of dangers. To cross it would be easy for him, but not so for his son. He turned to Samant who was looking at the desert shading his eyes with his hands. Why should he take this poor young boy by this dangerous route?

"My son, let's better divide our group here. You better go to Jhallor *via* Abu. I shall take the short-cut."

Samant understood the motive of his father and asked reproachfully: "What? What would happen if I accompanied you?"

"Why should anything happen to you?" asked Sajjan. "But it is better to divide ourselves into two groups, each taking a different route. I myself have never travelled by this short-cut. But we shall meet at Bhamaria."

"Tell me the truth, father," said Samant. "Are you afraid that I won't be able to stand the strain of coming by this route?"

"Nonsense! Did I ever question the bravery of the scion of the family of Ghogha Bapa?" He embraced his son.

Sajjan had decided to take the short-cut in order to get to Ghoghagadh two days earlier, but it was a risk; anything might happen to him; he may not be able to see his son again. His heart was full of love. Tears came into his eyes.

"I understand you, father. You want to take the short-cut in order to reach Ghoghagadh before me. Very well. You will see that I arrive there first."

"If you do not improve upon my performance, who else will?" replied Sajjan.

Samant saw tears welling up from his father's eyes and said: "What, what is this?"

"Nothing, nothing. I cannot stand the glare of the sun on the sand," said Sajjan.

Sajjan, taking his guide with him, rode into the desert. Samant looked with pride the way his father plunged into the terrible desert, more dangerous than the ocean. How well did he ride the camel! How fine he looked in his magnificent turban! He was indeed fortunate to have such a wonderful father. Within fifteen days, perhaps twelve days, he would again meet his grandfather, uncles and brothers as also his own father.

Since the remaining camels were ready to start, Samant, after casting a fugitive glance in the direction which his father had taken, set out on his journey.

The camel which Sajjan Chauhan was riding was called "Padamdi". There was no camel equal to her in the whole of Saurashtra. It travelled with the speed of wind and appeared to have a special gift of anticipating the rider's instructions. Soon Sajjan was on friendly terms with the camel. He kept on addressing it as "Padamdi." The camel responded with an affectionate neigh.

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"My dear Padamdi," said Sajjan, "Lord Somanath and Ghogha Bapa both depend on you now." Padamdi nodded her head as if she was fully aware of her responsibilities. She increased her pace. "Come on, my dear Padamdi, move fast. All the young men and women of Ghogha Bapa's house are ready to welcome you with garlands of pearls." Padamdi snorted and moved on more speedily.

By the time it was dark, a little hillock became visible. It had some stunted trees and a tall palm. Close by was a temple in ruins, and on it was flying a white flag.

Sajjan gave a shout of delight at the sight of the hill. "My dear Padamdi, well done. May you live long. Now we can rest a little." When the two camels reached the top of the hill, they saw a couple of huts; in front of them a few cowherds were sitting on their cots talking among themselves. Their camels were munching the leaves of a few trees and greeted their fellow-camels with appropriate sounds of welcome.

The sun had set by now and night was closing in. The tall palm tree carrying the flag of God Shankar stood out as a signpost, proclaiming the presence of humanity in the midst of the surrounding desert.

Sajjan got down from his camel and asked of the cowherds if they had anything to eat. "Yes, Bapu, we have *bajri* bread and water in the well."

Sajjan was anxious to get along as fast as he could. He inspected the camels carefully and entrusted the work of watering them to the guide.

He was also glad to find that, despite the distance she travelled, Padamdi looked quite fresh, but the guide's camel was tired. Sajjan patted her but found her incapable of travelling further at the speed at which he wanted. Sajjan asked the cowherds where they were going.

"We intend travelling to Halvad tomorrow."

"Then will you give me one of your camels and take one of mine in exchange?"

"Oh, no. Where do you wish to go, sir?"

"I wish to push through the desert right away."

"Right now? But that is impossible."

"Where have you come from?"

"We had taken a vow to worship at this temple and that has brought us here."

"I have taken a vow to go on from here without delay."

"Sir, it is the command of this goddess that no one may go beyond this point. No one who has attempted to has come back. The older people say that for three hundred miles there is neither tree nor water."

"Don't worry. All I ask is to give me one of your camels."

"No, sir. These are our camels and we cannot part with them."

"Then I am afraid I shall have to take one whether you

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like it or not." He called out to Sonia, his guide, to finish his meal quickly.

"I shall go and wash Padamdi and have a bath myself. You also wash your camel well," he said.

"I shall do it tomorrow morning."

"Are you mad? As soon as the moon comes out we must be on our way."

"But sir, how can we think of crossing this point at night?" exclaimed the thoroughly frightened Sonia. "And against the wishes of the goddess of the temple!"

"Why, are you afraid? We have to carry out the orders of Lord Somanath." With these words Sajjan led Padamdi to the pond.

Sonia turned to the other cowherds and asked: "Do you know where we get to next from here?"

"Nowhere. Your master has taken leave of his senses," remarked one of the older cowherds. "I have never heard of anyone who has gone along this road." Another exclaimed: "No one has seen even a bird fly in that direction!"

"Let's eat," said Sonia, as he brought his food to share it with his new friends.

The cowherds talked of the terrible fate that would overtake the two newcomers if they ignored the wishes of the desert goddess and cautioned Sonia not to proceed further.

Sajjan was not afraid of anything. He had only one

objective: to get to Ghogha Bapa as quickly as possible and give him the message of Lord Shiva. He washed Padamdi, and then bathed himself. He filled his water-bags with water from the well and then after offering worship to the desert goddess, rejoined the cowherds.

Padamdi followed him like a docile cow. She had become virtually a slave of this affectionate master. Sonia served him food.

Sajjan asked if the cowherds would give him a fresh camel. And he received the same negative reply.

"Then let us help ourselves to one, Sonia!"

"But how can we go beyond this, the home of the desert goddess?"

"So you also are afraid? Am I not with you?"

"My lord, if the goddess were to be angry with us, who will protect us?"

"But I happen to know that far from being angry with us, she will be pleased with us."

"That may be as you say, but let us not go now," Sonia was beginning to be obstinate.

"We will go now," asserted Sajjan. "Hurry, wash your camel. The moon will soon be up."

But Sonia stood hesitant. It was only when Sajjan angrily stood up to thrash him that he slowly led his camel to the pond.

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By the time Sajjan had eaten and was ready, Sonia too returned. Sajjan again demanded of the cowherds if they would give him one of their camels if he offered them some money. One of the younger cowherds was tempted, but the older one reproached him with the remark: "Are you out to kill a camel which has been in your family for so long?"

Sajjan realised that there was no hope of his being able to persuade them and so he ordered Sonia to get ready to depart. Sonia made one more attempt to delay the departure, but Sajjan brushed aside his protest angrily.

The moon had by this time arisen and was shedding its soft light upon the desert which looked beautiful. A gentle cool breeze had begun to blow and the lovely palm made a beautiful picture against the background of the moonlit sky.

Sajjan mounted his Padamdi. Sonia followed slowly, reluctantly.

The young cowherd said: "Come back soon."

"Jaya Somanath," Sajjan answered with a shout and urged his camel forward.

11.

FACING THE STORM

THE bright moon shone over the desert. It was now possible to see clearly. The travellers found the gentle breeze that was blowing and the early winter cold most bracing.

Padamdi too was in very good form. Everything made Sajjan feel that they would be able to cover quite a good distance before dawn.

However, as if to prove the correctness of the cowherd's prophecy, Sonia sat uneasily on his camel, trembling with fear. He had never travelled in this part of the desert and was quite convinced that anyone who went beyond the limit set by the desert goddess was inviting a catastrophe. The camel he rode, as if she had read her rider's mind, walked slowly. In spite of Sajjan's repeated instructions, Sonia refused to hasten or to give a reply.

Sajjan lost his temper. Turning back he hit Sonia's camel with his cane, but it had no effect on the animal. She obstinately squatted where it stood, doing exactly what Sonia wanted her to do.

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“Get off the camel, Sonia. What are you waiting for?” said Sajjan, and alighting from Padamdi he whacked Sonia’s camel mercilessly. It rose on its legs with great difficulty. Sajjan rode Padamdi again and keeping close to Sonia’s camel, attempted to make her move fast. At last Sajjan realised that the camel’s obstinacy stemmed from Sonia’s; it was merely obeying its master’s instructions.

“Sonia, you better sit on Padamdi and I shall ride your camel. I shall teach her a lesson.”

“No, no, sir, here she goes,” said Sonia. At last the camel picked up speed. Sajjan followed and when he was satisfied that Sonia was at last travelling at fairly fast speed, he went ahead.

Immediately Sonia’s camel slowed down. When Sajjan saw this, he urged Sonia to hasten. But this time he found that the camel had started moving backwards. Sajjan lost his temper completely. He hit Sonia with his cane. “You, scoundrel, it is you who do not wish to come with me.”

“No, no, no,” rejoined Sonia as he struck his animal. But instead of moving forward, she turned round and then raced towards the temple of the desert goddess, at a pace even faster than Padamdi’s.

Sajjan kept looking back sadly at the fast disappearing Sonia and his camel and proceeded on his way when he could see them no more.

He was sorely tempted to punish Sonia, but he resisted the temptat on, for he knew that his mission must come first.

“Padamdi, my beloved, it is now up to you and me to carry out the task given to us by Lord Shankar.”

It was the fourth night of the new moon. The moonlight was bright enough to light up the vast expanse of the desert. The sands extended on all sides like the waves of the sea. A gentle breeze began to blow in the quiescency of the night.

The little bells tied around Padamdi's feet jingled, making a rhythmic music. Sajjan Chauhan's heart was filled with joy. He had no doubt whatsoever in the invincibility of the Chauhans. Ghogha Bapa's sons had fought in many a battle and won. What could this foreign invader Hammir do against them?

Sajjan kept his camel facing the north, in the direction of the Pole Star. At the start Padamdi began to slow her pace and Sajjan tried to snatch a little sleep on the camel's back. As soon as it was dawn, the fresh breeze of the early morning revived Sajjan, who urged Padamdi to move faster. She completely understood her master and only needed a little prodding to move forward with speed.

The path that he had taken did not appear to be as the cowherds had predicted. He came across a spot covered by vegetation and rested himself under the shade of trees.

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Padamdi seemed to be endowed with a special sense of direction. Every few hours they would come to some spot where there was water and grass and trees. There they would rest. Sajjan would eat and drink a mouthful of water from his water-bag. Padamdi also would feed herself with the leaves of the trees. Then his optimism would return that he was on the right track. The stories that he had heard of dacoits passing the desert from the straight route appeared credible.

In the afternoon on the fourth day Sajjan felt that Padamdi was feeling tired. The sun was oppressively hot. At times, the sand stretched out in all directions, rose in spirals.

This stage of the journey was becoming more difficult. For miles there was no grass, not even birds, but sand all around—dazzling sand—in all directions, often blinding Sajjan's eyes. Hot winds scorched his skin.

Fear and doubt began to enter his mind. Was he on the right track? What would happen if there was no place to rest or water to drink? But he consoled himself with the thought that he had taken this route in order to carry out the wishes of Lord Shankar and that the Chauhans were under His protection. His aim was to stop the infidels from attacking the shrine of the Lord. Repeatedly he said: "Lord! Why should I be afraid when I am under Your protection?"

Soon Padamdi felt uneasy. "My dear Padamdi, please do not accept defeat," said Sajjan, as he gave her a

reassuring nudge. But this time he did not evoke any enthusiastic response from the camel. Sajjan got down from the camel, gave her some water to drink and then claspings to her neck, gave her eyes whatever protection that was possible until the sun began to set.

Later in the evening Padamdi felt rested and refreshed. When Sajjan resumed his journey, a cool breeze began to blow. Soon he regained his confidence in his mission. But Padamdi could not cover a long distance; she could only gather speed when the moon came out.

* * *

On the fifth day at day break, hot winds began to blow. By midday there was a storm. All around him spirals of sand rose furiously like pillars of fire. Neither Sajjan nor Padamdi could keep their eyes open. Soon it became impossible to go forward. Sajjan dismounted and made Padamdi to squat on the ground and sheltered her eyes with his body, and also kept his own eyes shut, his face hidden in her neck.

When the sun set and the storm abated, he once again resumed his journey.

For the first time, fear entered the brave heart of Sajjan. What would happen if he had to go through the sand-storm? Had he miscalculated? If this was the right

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way, there must be some place to rest. Had he lost his way? Would he share the fate of those who had lost their lives in the desert?

That night Padamdi showed signs of fatigue. Sajjan too felt terribly tired. So they rested, Sajjan lying himself down by the side of Padamdi.

When it was dawn, Sajjan was awakened by the restlessness of Padamdi. She was on her feet and was excited. Sajjan understood her. She was anxious to move forward. He immediately mounted her and prodded her to move forward northwards.

Padamdi ignored his persuasion and refused to go northward. When he could not persuade her any longer, he hit her with his cane. Padamdi snorted, but without caring for his orders, turned eastwards and began to run. Sajjan understood that she had instinctively sensed that it would be dangerous to travel northward and that instinct made her change the direction.

"Lord Shankar, I am now in Your hands," he muttered to himself. The only satisfaction that he could derive from the situation was that he did not bring his son with him.

After Padamdi had run on for a couple of hours at full speed, Sajjan realised what she had sensed. He could see following them a swirling mass of sand from the north and from the west.

“Padamdi, my dear, what a terrible fate you saved us from! May you live long! You have certainly saved my life.”

The danger had not yet passed. The storm was closing in on them. Padamdi too was racing forward at faster speed. The only thing that could save them from the terrible sandstorm was to give Padamdi freedom to escape certain death.

This was the twelfth day of his journey. Padamdi was running with a newfound strength. She knew what was in store for them.

It was getting darker. The sandstorm was closing in on them. Sajjan began to lose heart. In front of them was the unending desert. How long could poor Padamdi run at this speed and how was she to escape the storm?

It was midday; but they could not rest for food or drink. The greathearted camel ran on tirelessly. Then came a moment when the sandstorm almost enveloped them. Padamdi turned southwards. It looked as if there was no escape.

All of a sudden the sand around them seemed to come alive and to whirl round and round them. They had to stop. Padamdi squatted down and Sajjan again shaded her eyes and her nose from the sand with his body. He felt that the end had come. There was no hope of escaping the sandstorm.

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All around he saw sand searing and suffocating. He bid farewell to his companion, the faithful camel, and said his last prayer to Lord Somanath.

Suddenly the storm ceased. The spiralling pillars of sand passed by. "Padamdi, my love," he shouted, "we are saved. Lord Shankar had spared us."

However, he had spoken too soon. He saw another sandstorm coming towards them. For the moment, it was a little far away. Padamdi's foresight had enabled him to keep ahead of the storm centre. However, he now realised that he could not take the direct route to Ghoghagadh. He must accept defeat and take the normal route.

By the time the sun began to set, the second storm too had gone ahead, leaving them alone. Padamdi danced with joy when the stars began to shine in the clear sky. "Well done, my Padamdi, well done." Sajjan made her squat down, and began to fondle her. The gentle cool breeze of the night was restoring their strength and courage. They were both thoroughly tired out and leaving Lord Shankar to protect them, they soon fell in a deep sleep.

Sajjan had so far assumed that if he kept on going northwards, he would eventually arrive at Ghoghagadh. The sandstorm upset all his calculations. He did not know where he was, nor in which direction Ghoghagadh was situated. Why on earth had he committed the folly of taking an

unfamiliar route when he was entrusted with an important mission? Which could be the road to Sapaldaksha? Where would Sursagar be and in which direction did Jhallor lie?

In spite of all his misfortunes, his faith in Lord Shankar was as firm as ever. He had no doubt whatsoever that in the end, all would be well. Ghogha Bapa had had to face difficulties and problems on many an occasion no less serious, and yet he had survived. The one delight in his old age was to narrate stories of his valour in a quiet and dignified manner to his large family. He too, Sajjan thought, would live to talk to his descendants some day about Padamdi's great performance. He was quite certain that the youngsters would refuse to believe that anyone could be capable of such deeds of valour and endurance. He twirled his moustache with pride. What the minstrels of Rajasthan sang in praise of Ghoga Bapa's deeds, they would sing of his too.

12.

SAJJAN MEETS THE INVADERS

SAJJAN rode on, daydreaming. Samant should have reached Jhallor by now. Devoted son that he was, he would be proud of his father's great achievement. And how nice it would be for all three of them—father, son and mother—to sit together and talk again of all these experiences. Samant's mother was a true Chauhan woman; she would not have been happy with a less spectacular achievement. Was he not the most favourite grandson of Ghogha Bapa?

Ghogha Bapa often claimed that when he was of Sajjan's age, he looked exactly like him. Sajjan also fondly believed that at Ghogha Bapa's age, he would look exactly like him. Thus was Sajjan lost in his dreams, while Padamdi followed whichever direction she liked.

The desert had once again become friendly. On the eighth day in the evening, Sajjan sighted a hillock covered with trees. Before Sajjan could turn Padamdi in that direction, she had already begun to run towards it.

The hillock was deserted, but they found a deep well with plenty of water in it. The very sight of it was sufficient to make Sajjan forget his fatigue. He drew out some water, drank it and then gave as much to Padamdi as she wanted; Then he took his bath and washed down Padamdi. Not for many a day had Padamdi an opportunity to chew green leaves.

After they had satisfied their hunger, they settled down to sleep under the shade of a tree. The stars in the sky watched over this pair of friends—one a human, the other an animal.

Only when the sun was well up in the sky did Sajjan wake up with a start. Padamdi had been watching over him with the affection of a mother, and in her own way, showed her delight at seeing him awakened. "Padamdi, my dear," he said, "we have still quite a long way to go."

Sajjan filled his leather bags with water and resumed his journey, leaving it, as before, to Padamdi to find her way.

The ninth day passed uneventfully, but that night Sajjan realised that instead of going northwards, he was travelling westwards and therefore, away from Ghoghagadh. He tried to turn Padamdi to the north, but to no avail. Sajjan offered a silent prayer to Lord Shankar, and decided that he might just as well leave Padamdi to her own devices. He was

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aware of his own helplessness, and his one great desire now was to find himself back on the familiar route.

When the tenth day began, at places, the desert was full of vegetation. It was evident that he was close to some well-frequented desert route.

He had long given up worrying. Lord Somanath alone knew where the Hammir of Garjan was. It was not going to be easy for him to go past Ghogha Bapa. He would warn other rulers on the way also. How dare anyone who chose to fight Lord Somanath ever think he could cross the desert without meeting with strenuous resistance!

It was now eleven days he had been in the desert and the eighteenth since he had left Prabhas, when he saw more and more trees. Was he nearing Sapaldaksha?

Suddenly Padamdi let out a scream.

Sajjan looked around to see what had happened. He saw what looked like three black clouds rushing in the sky in his direction. Before long he was sure that what he thought were clouds were, in fact, huge blackbirds flying in groups. As they went past him eastwards, he recognised them as vultures.

He was terrified. A strange dread gripped his heart. Except on a battlefield, on the day following a fierce battle, he had never seen so many vultures together. Had there been a battle already? Could it be that the Hammir of

Garjan had crossed Multan and Ghoghagadh and had even fought a battle near Sapaldaksha?

For a long time he could hear the screeches of vultures as they flew over him. "Padamdi, my dear, I am sure, a terrible battle is in progress." Padamdi seemed to understand what she was told, for she took the direction in which the vultures were flying.

* * *

After they had travelled for some time, Padamdi again let out a loud scream. Gently patting Padamdi, Sajjan asked her, "What is it? What makes you afraid?" Within a few moments Sajjan discovered the reason. His own sensitive nose picked up a faint but clearly foul smell as of decomposing corpses.

Padamdi climbed an elevated mound and stopped trembling in every limb. A short distance away on the level ground, a huge flock of vultures sat on the ground and as far as the eye could see, from the north to the south, there were other vultures flying or alighting.

Sajjan guessed the meaning of their presence; it made him sick. Before him there lay decomposing corpses, many lying on the ground, many half buried in the sand. It was like a highway of dead bodies made by a huge army passing through the desert.

Padamdi refused to go forward. Sajjan was forced to

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get off and began to lead her by the bridle. He tried to push his way through the thick assemblage of vultures. Some ignored his efforts, others took off and kept flying in circles overhead. Sajjan could identify as to who the dead were; not only they were bodies of men but also of elephants, camels and horses.

He could see that the dead bodies were not of those who had died in battle. They had evidently formed part of a large army which must have gone ahead, leaving behind it those who died for want of water or on account of scorching heat or sandstorm. Sajjan, however, could guess the vastness of the army which had passed this way.

Ignoring the foul smell, and overcoming his disgust and a gnawing fear, he decided to go forward. Whose could such a large army be? It could not belong to the Raja of Sapaldaksha, nor to Jhallor nor to Chitod (in modern Mevad). Could this then be the army of the Hammir of Garjan? Unable to look upon the dreadful scene any longer, he moved away to proceed in the direction in which the army had proceeded. Padamdi too was tugging at the bit, anxious to leave this terrible spot.

Towards evening he sighted a hamlet in the distance, and proceeded towards it. The hamlet was located in a grove of trees. Anxious to find some place to rest a while, he entered it, but was shocked to see no sight of beast or man. The doors of the huts were open. The roofs of some

of them had fallen down, the temple had been razed to the ground. In the pond there was nothing but mud and he could see that many animals had been washed there. There was not much water in the well either. But worse, this part of the desert had become a large cemetery!

Even the brave Sajjan was horrified at the destruction that had been wrought. Almost mechanically he drew out some water from the well, had a bath and washed Padamdi. He was too sick to be able to eat, but let Padamdi graze to her heart's content. When night fell, the terrible desolation of the place frightened him. Somehow he managed to pass the night, but restlessly.

The following day he was ready to leave in the morning. He would have liked to take some other route, but he could not overcome his desire to find out whose could this mighty and fearful army be. What could have happened to Ghoghagadh and Sapaldaksha? He was afraid even to speculate.

After Sajjan had travelled for four or five hours, he saw a cloud of sand from which emerged camel riders who were travelling at a fast speed in his direction. Padamdi's first instinct was to turn tail and run, but before long the oncoming group of camel riders caught up with them.

There were seven camels. Five of them were ridden by ferocious bearded men, wearing armour of leather and

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carrying unfamiliar weapons. On the other two camels were seated the leader and his guide, a local *rabari* (breeder of cows). The leader was a tall, fair young man who appeared to be evidently an officer of rank in the army of Hammir.

At a word of command from him, his companions surrounded Sajjan and the guide began to interrogate him. Was he familiar with the desert routes?

Sajjan was offended by the surpercilious tone in which the question was asked, but he decided to take no notice of it and answered simply, "Yes, but who are you?"

When the guide communicated the reply to the leader of the group, he burst out laughing and said: "I shall tell you in a moment who we are, but first tell me which is the quickest way to Gujarat."

"Who wishes to go to Gujarat?" enquired Sajjan.

"We."

Sajjan had suddenly a bright idea. This Muslim army was planning to go to Gujarat in order to destroy the Shrine of Lord Somanath. Surely the Lord himself must have guided them to this point so that he could meet them! He smiled to himself. What better opportunity could be afforded to him of carrying out Lord Shankar's command than that he should destroy the Hammir of Garjan!

Aloud he replied: "Very well, I will take you there."

"Do you really know the way?"

"Yes, I am just coming from Gujarat."

"How long will it take?"

"Twelve to fifteen days."

When the leader heard this, he was delighted. "Come with us" was the order given to Sajjan through the guide.

"I am ready," replied Sajjan.

He realised that he had no alternative but to accompany these men. Here was his opportunity to carry out, singlehanded, the wishes of Lord Somanath. The thought filled him with delight.

It was clear to him that although he was being taken along as a guide, he was virtually their prisoner. The leader of the group kept a close watch on him, but gave Padamdi enough water to drink and invited Sajjan to share his meal with him and talked to him in a courteous manner. But whenever Sajjan asked for any information, he received an evasive reply.

Sajjan then thought of a way to trick them. After they had finished their meal, he stood up and said, "I shall now take leave of you."

"Where do you wish to go?" enquired the guide, after he had a brief talk with the leader.

"I wish to go to the Hammir of Garjan."

The men burst out laughing. "What do you want to meet him for?"

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“I cannot tell you that, but it will make his task easier.”

“Who are you?”

“I am a guide of the desert. My job is to show travellers the right route.”

When the guide translated this to the leader, the men held a consultation among themselves and then told Sajjan that they would take him to their master, the Hammir.

Sajjan was delighted at the success of his plan, but at the same time his suspicion was confirmed. Hammir must have gone past Multan, Nadul, Sapaldaksha (Ajmer region). What happened to the rulers of these kingdoms? Were they killed? Were they defeated or had they let the conqueror march through their kingdoms? Had the Hammir passed by Ghoghagadh? This was what Sajjan wished to ascertain, but he did not dare to ask the question.

13.

THE HAMMIR OF GARJAN

THE party travelled all day long at a fast speed. Later in the evening, they arrived at a point whence they could see a large camp. This was no ordinary camp. It was like a huge city, the like of which Sajjan had not seen before.

All over the place could be seen groups of people sitting around fires to warm themselves. Thousands of torches were being carried from one place to another, and in their light could be seen the camp stretching as far as the eye could see. Innumerable were the men, elephants, camels, horses and other animals in the army.

Ten thousand flags of different sizes and shapes fluttered in the wind and the camp was dotted with rows of thousands of tents. There was a terrific cacophony of men and animals, bugles and drums—so loud as to be heard from a long distance.

All this petrified Sajjan. He had never imagined that there could be an army of such a size. Nor did he ever conceive in his wildest dreams the possibility of the Hammir of Garjan travelling such a long distance with such a large

army, and camping, of all places, in such a barren waterless desert.

For a moment Sajjan lost courage and confidence, but as soon as he thought of Lord Somanath's command, his doubts were resolved. If God had decided to destroy the invader, nothing would protect him. If so great a king as Ravana of ten heads and twenty arms was destroyed, who was the Hammir in comparison! And it might be that God had decided that the Hammir should be destroyed by an insignificant Rajput like himself.

The leader of the group was evidently an officer of high rank. The sentries made way for him at his command. As soon as the men in the camp saw him coming, they bent low and saluted him, touching their forehead with their right hand.

Sajjan's eyes met an unfamiliar sight of soldiers from different countries and strange military equipments. There was no lack of food and drink; everyone was enjoying himself.

Sajjan had an uncomfortable feeling. Have the brave warriors of Rajasthan been vanquished? What had happened at Ghoghagadh? Where was Ghogha Bapa? His inability to find answers to these questions worried him to a point where he felt himself almost choked.

The officer ordered him to get down from his camel. Sajjan immediately obeyed, but lest he might be separated

from his Padamdi, he said: "No camel can equal this one, and without her assistance, I will not be able to guide you."

"You will be given your camel later," the guide conveyed the leader's orders to him.

"Come with me," said the officer to Sajjan.

He followed the officer, and two members of the group walked behind him. He was watched closely by all the three, and had he shown the slightest inclination to run away or be aggressive, he was quite certain that he would find his head chopped off immediately.

Soon they came to a large white tent made of animal skin. It was surrounded by a wall of soldiers, standing with their swords unsheathed. Behind this human wall, men armed with bows and arrows were stationed at regular intervals. Only one way was open by which anyone from outside could enter this human fortress. Everyone bowed low and saluted the officer as he took Sajjan by it.

At the entrance to the tent, a sentry went in to announce their arrival. The command came from inside the tent that they should be allowed to enter it. Two fierce-looking negroes of gigantic stature lifted a flap of the tent.

As they entered, Sajjan literally rubbed his eyes in surprise at the sight of the pomp he witnessed. Thirty torchbearers stood, rigid like statues, holding aloft their torches. Close by the entrance, stood two huge negroes,

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each holding a scimitar in his hand. A perfumed oil lamp in the centre added to the brightness of the interior.

At the other end of the tent was spread out a large carpet made up of tiger and deer skins, on which a powerful-looking man was seated, reclining against a large cushion and stroking his long, red beard. Beneath his bushy eyebrows were two large eyes, dark and fierce. With his strong left hand, he toyed with the hilt of a large naked sword.

He had on a bizarre dress of leather. On his head he wore a queerly-shaped turban which was studded with emeralds. To his right sat a middle-aged Muslim, behind whose ear was a pen and from whose waist hung an ink-holder. By his side was seated a short but powerful-looking warrior, flanked by a young soldier. These two looked like Rajputs.

To the left of the large man reclining against the cushion was a Muslim warrior, whose uniform suggested that he was a high-ranking military officer.

As soon as the red-bearded man saw them come, he sat up erect and in a loud and terrifying voice, asked the officer to come near. The officer immediately moved forward, bowing in all humility. Sajjan found that the leader's name was Salar Masud.

Sajjan was now sure that the red-haired man was no other than the fearful Hammir Mohammad of Garjan, who

had destroyed the cities of Kanauj, Kalingat, Nagarkot and Mathura, who had sold for three and a half dinars every Brahmin of Mathura in the bazaars of Garjan and who had taken the vow to cross the desert and destroy the abode of God, Lord Somanath. Sajjan's blood boiled with anger, and had there been the slightest chance, he would have killed the man then and there, and thus carried out Gang Sarvagna's behest.

Sajjan's guess about the identity of the man seated in the middle was correct. It was the Sultan of Ghaznee, Yaminudaula Mohamood Nizamuddin Kasim Mohamood. In the short space of fourteen years, he had become famous throughout Asia and was regarded as the bravest of the brave.

Though starting life as a poor and unknown man, he had acquired immense wealth and power. Securing mastery over Khurasan, within no time he had seized the rulership of Ghaznee from his brother. He had achieved success because of his firm determination and unflinching bravery. Whomsoever he fought, he conquered and whatever he wished for, he succeeded in obtaining.

Following in the footsteps of his father, he started to plunder the untold riches of India. Lahore surrendered, Multan fell quickly. The Hindu kings when vanquished began to seek his favours. The united armies of Gwalior and

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Kanauj, Delhi and Sapaldaksha were defeated. Nagarkot, the city of wealth, was seized by him.

He aspired to be the torchbearer of Islam and to achieve immortality by destroying idols. He razed the temples of Mathura of age-old glory. The plundered crowns of deities he gave to the women of his zenana.

There was no limit to his ambition. He had a generous heart and the imagination of a poet. By some glorious action, he wanted to be remembered for eternity. What Khalif Omar, the greatest among the Khalifs of Islam, had done, he wanted to do.

He inherited the love of art and culture from his Iranian mother. He was fond of poetry. He wanted Ghaznee to be the first city in the world. He had a great flair for winning the hearts of other people. A brave warrior himself, he could appreciate bravery in others. There was place in his heart for people of all faiths—provided they did not oppose him. He could not tolerate idol-worship, yet he admired bravery even in idol-worshippers. Even when he triumphed over the Rajputs, he was spellbound by their amazing heroism.

He had organised a magnificent army. In his army there were warriors from different lands, from Caucasus to the valley of the Ganga.

He had marched hundreds of miles to destroy the idol whose temple was situated at the other end of the desert and to acquire its immense riches.

The Rajput rulers ruling over small kingdoms could not match his brilliance in tactics and strategy. They were undoubtedly brave, determined and heroic, but in their shortsighted pride, they showed themselves incapable of judging their opponents' strength. They were skilful at fight, but incapable of co-operating with each other in order to fight a common foe. Each was prepared to fight to defend his little kingdom and if necessary die, but they never could realise that by uniting for the sake of their land and their faith, their ability to resist could be greatly increased.

Salar Masud sat down at the feet of Hammir and submitted his report in their strange language. When he finished, the conversation became general, but every now and again the Hammir's roaring voice could be heard above the conversation.

After some time, the officer who was taking notes and the Rajput sitting next to him, approached Sajjan. The very sight of the Rajput angered Sajjan almost uncontrollably and his hands itched to grip his throat. If he could have found some way of carrying out Lord Shankar's orders, he would have gladly done so, even at the cost of his life, by killing this traitor to his land and faith.

Sevandrai, the Rajput, came to Sajjan with a broad smile on his face. Behind him, walking slowly, came the officer with the pen. "Where do you come from?" asked Sevandrai to Sajjan.

"I come from Bhamaria," replied Sajjan.

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"Where is it?"

"It is between Sapaldaksha and Ghoghagadh." Sevandrai and Al-Utabi—for that was the name of the other man—held a brief consultation in a language which Sajjan could not follow. From his seat, the Sultan asked a question, which was answered by Al-Utabi.

"Where do you live?" asked Sevandrai.

"I belong to Anhilwad Patan."

"When did you leave this place?"

"Fifteen days ago."

"What!" exclaimed Sevandrai in surprise. "By which route did you travel?"

"I know all the routes in the desert."

"Which fortresses did you pass on the way?"

"If I had travelled along the route of these fortresses, it would have taken me over two months. I travelled straight from Anhilwad."

"Are there resting places on the way?"

"Without them, could I have come alone and alive?"

"Where are we now?"

"You are very far away from the highway. I cannot understand why you strayed from it."

"How far is the highway?"

"It would take this army eight to ten days to get to it, and, on the way, it would have to face the rulers of Mewad, Jhallor, Gujarat and Malva."

"How do you know?"

"I know everything. Over a lakh of Rajputs have gathered there, ready to block your way."

"Will you show us the road by which you came?"

"Yes, provided you give me back my camel."

"Where is it?"

"That man took it away," said Sajjan, pointing to Masud.

Sevandrai and Al-Utabi went over to the Sultan and the three of them, talked in whispers.

On the second day, Salar Masud kept Sajjan confined to his tent. At the crack of dawn on the third day, Sultan Mohamood lifted camp. He had decided not to go for the main highway where the Rajput armies were believed to be waiting for him. He abandoned his plan to march eastwards in search of the straight road through the desert in favour of marching westwards guided by Sajjan on his trusty Padamdi.

Ghogha Chauhan's son, considering himself fortunate that he was enabled to carry out the commands of Lord Somanath, led the way, singing softly to himself and urging Padamdi forward.

He had decided to take the invader's army straight into the jaws of the death-dealing sandstorm.

14.

SAMANT MEETS A FRIEND

IN his elated mood, inspired by memories of Chaula, Samant decided to outpace his father. He was quite convinced that he would have not the slightest difficulty in doing so.

Travelling with all possible speed, he lost no time in going past Abu and Chandravati, and after a short halt at Shrimal, he travelled rapidly towards Jhallor, the capital of the Parmar ruler Wakpatiraj, who was related to Ghogha Bapa.

When Samant arrived at Jhallor, he found a party camped on the large grounds in front of its gates. As soon as he got down from his camel, a handsome young man, fully armed, greeted him. His face seemed familiar, but Samant could not immediately recollect where and when he had seen him.

"Where are you coming from?" enquired the young man.

Samant was now able to identify him. He had seen him in the temple of Somanath, witnessing Chaula's memorable dance. He replied with equal friendliness: "I am coming from the same place that you have come from."

"From Patan?" asked the young man with some surprise.

"No, from Prabhas. Were you not seated next to Gang Sarvagna and King Bheemdev of Patan?"

"Were you there?"

"Yes." Quick-witted Samant had by now guessed what had brought this man to Jhallor. "And you are here as I am, under the orders of Lord Somanath. What is your name?"

"I am King Bheemdev's minister, Vimal." And with this remark he took Samant away from the guards who had accompanied him, before resuming the conversation.

"Who are you?" asked Vimal of Samant.

"I am Ghogha Rana's grandson, Samant," was the smiling reply. "And I suppose you have come because of that Hammir."

"And you?" asked Vimal shrewdly, without admitting the purpose of his mission.

"I am on my way to inform Ghogha Bapa of the invader. I have been sent by Gurudev. But what about yourself?"

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"I am glad that we have met," replied Vimal. "The ruler of Jhallor is related to you. If you also support me, he might listen to us."

"What do you wish to tell him?"

"That if Jhallor is willing to help, the armies of Patan will come here, and together they would destroy the Hammir of Garjan in the desert."

"I see!" Samant laughed. "That means that he can reach the desert without being stopped. My Ghogha Bapa, the ruler of the desert, the brave King of Sapaldaksha with his thousand fortresses, and the rulers of Nadul, Kanauj and Sursagar—they are all there to send the Hammir back to where he came from."

"All that is true, but the more prepared we are, the better. We have been entrusted with a duty by Lord Somanath."

"Do not worry. Ghogha Bapa will never let him through."

"Do I not know it?" rejoined Vimal diplomatically. He did not want to say anything to discourage the enthusiastic Samant.

While they were still busy talking, there emerged from the gate of the fort, a small caravan composed of a few camel riders. It was travelling fast and was on its way

northwards. Vimal kept his eyes fixed upon this small group till it disappeared from sight.

* * *

Later that evening, they met Wakpatiraj. He was lying on his couch and was having his limbs massaged. The seventy-year-old warrior not only looked powerful, but there was in his eyes the confident arrogance of a successful campaigner.

Wakpatiraj made Samant sit by his side and kept patting him on the back every now and again with affection. At a slightly lower level sat Vimal, as befitted a minister. A few courtiers were also present.

"Bapu, I have come at the behest of Gurudev Gang Sarvagna and my lord and master, the King of Patan," said Vimal. "Samantsingh is here on the same mission. We have to talk to you about a very urgent and important matter." The courtiers and the masseurs took the hint and went out immediately.

"What is it? Tell me," said Wakpatiraj.

"As you know, the Hammir of Garjan is on his way to Prabhas to destroy the temple of Somanath."

"Yes, yes, I know. And everyone in this fortress knows about it," said the old ruler, bursting into loud laughter.

"How?" asked Samant, riled at the old man's laughter.

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"Ajaypal, the Mukhi of Multan, was here with a message from the Muslim ruler. He left only a little while ago."

"And what was the message?" enquired Samant and Vimal simultaneously.

"So, then it is I who have to give you news! The Garjan ruler sent me his tribute from Multan."

"Tribute?"

"Yes. He wants my help. He wants to be allowed to pass through Jhallor unhindered. He is terrified of the Chauhans of Songiri." Wakpatiraj gave a special twist to his moustache as he said this.

"Did you agree?" asked Vimal breathlessly.

"I accepted the tribute offered by him and have put it in my treasury."

"So, you really promised to help him?" said Samant, restraining his anger with some difficulty.

"My reply was: 'By all means go to Gujarat if you wish; but do not set foot in the territory of the Parmars. Otherwise you will be taught a lesson which you will never forget.'"

"But, uncle," intervened Samant, "Minister Vimal has come to you for your help. If you and Bheemdev combine, you can not only stop the Muslims from going forward, but destroy them."

“Oh, so Bheemdev does want my help!” commented Wakpatiraj with a malicious laughter. “Last year when I asked him for a thousand horse-men and two hundred camel-men in order to invade Marwad, he refused saying that the ruler of Marwad was related to him. Go and tell your Bheemdev that he may do what he likes. Why should I come to his assistance?”

“But, sire,” remarked Vimal persuasively, “the Hammir is here to destroy the temple of Lord Somanath. All we want to do is to protect the abode of God.”

“That is how your Bheemdev talks. When Mathura was destroyed, why did he not go to its rescue?”

“But, sire, how can you tolerate even the idea of the Muslim hordes going through Sapaldaksha, Nadul, Jhallor, Abu and Patan, to Prabhas unchecked?”

“So long as a Parmar lives, no Muslim would dare to put his foot in Jhallor,” said the old ruler.

“If you, sire, don’t help my master and he is defeated, the Hammir will ultimately destroy you,” said Vimal.

“Nonsense! A foe who will defeat the armies of Jhallor is yet to be born,” rejoined Wakpatiraj.

“If he succeeds in destroying the temple of Somanath, it will be a disgrace for every Kshatriya,” said Samant.

“But, Somanath is for Bheemdev to look after. Is he

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not strong enough to look after the shrine at which he worships?"

"But, uncle, how can we stand by and watch this foreigner go through our kingdoms and destroy our temples? How can we allow him to go through our territories—he who is an enemy of Brahmins and sacred cows, he who destroys our shrines?"

"That is why I have told him that he must not put his foot into my territory."

"That means he can push his way through other kingdoms?" said Vimal. "But the people he will kill will be your own, the temples he will destroy will be your own."

"You talk sweetly, my son, but I am not going to be taken in by you," said Wakpatiraj.

"So, you will not help in stopping this Muslim coming to desecrate our temples?" Samant spoke angrily. "Does this befit the great Wakpatiraj?"

"You are a presumptuous youngster," replied Wakpatiraj contemptuously. "I am not a fool like your Ghogha Bapa to fight other people's battles for them."

"Uncle!" exclaimed the impatient Samant, "Ghogha Bapa has spent all his life rushing to the assistance of others. So far as he is concerned, he looks upon other people's interests as his own."

"Maharaj, but my master is prepared to give you whatever you want," said Vimal in an attempt to pacify the old ruler.

"Now he is talking sense. I thought he wanted to conquer Malwa and Abu."

"But, sire, the situation is changed. Just now it is for you to dictate your terms. He is anxious to protect the shrine of Lord Somanath. He has no alternative but to give you whatever you ask for your help."

"You are too late. If you had come earlier, things might have been different. But Wakpatiraj never goes back on his word. I will not give a passage to the Muslim ruler through Jhallor; at the same time I will not assist your master."

"But if the invader first defeats us and then turns to you, what would you do?"

"Let him try!"

"Don't you think that one who can spread his terror right up to Prabhas, is not the one to be deterred by another enemy?" asked Vimal.

"You are young, my boy. Everyone is not like your lord and master. You have not yet seen the bravery of the Parmars. Let the Hammir try to enter my territories," replied Wakpatiraj excitedly.

"Your courage lies in driving the Muslims back," said Samant, finding it difficult to suppress his anger.

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“How dare you speak so impertinently? Go and ask your Ghogha Bapa about Wakpatiraj’s courage and bravery.”

Samant immediately got up. “It is not necessary to give advice to Ghoghsa Bapa. So long as he is alive, the Hammir will not have a chance of advancing into the desert. You may feel satisfied with yourself and take delight in your blindness; but if the Hammir is not beaten back, he will not let anyone of you escape with his life.” Before Wakpatiraj could say anything, Samant left the room.

“Every member of the family of Ghogha Bapa is rash and thoughtless,” murmured the old ruler. Turning to Vimal, he said: “You go back to your master. Tell him: I will not go back on my promise.”

“Tomorrow morning I shall see you again.”

“I shall not change my mind.”

“Just as you wish.” Vimal too now stood up, folded his hands and went out with a courteous bow. Wakpatiraj sent for his masseurs.

15.

THE MUKHI OF MULTAN

THE selfishness and complacency of the Ruler of Jhallor made Samant very angry. He went impatiently to the room in which he was housed and ordered his men to get ready to depart.

Shortly afterwards, Vimal arrived. Though very worried himself, he was distressed to find Samant seated on the ground, a picture of woe and dismay. In an affectionate tone he said, "Chauhan, do not be impatient."

"To what depth has Wakpatiraj fallen!" exclaimed Samant. "How is one to believe that the great Ruler of Jhallor is prepared to allow the enemy to pass through for the sake of a little money? It is enough to make us hide our heads in shame. If Ghogha Bapa had been here, he would have chopped off his head."

"My dear brother, we are his guests. It does not befit us to speak in this manner," said the Minister Vimal.

"I would say to his face what I am saying now. That Wakpatiraj should talk thus! I would find it easier to believe if someone were to tell me that the sun rises in the west."

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"Do not be impatient. We will try to persuade him again tomorrow," said Vimal.

"That is impossible. He will never listen to us. He is only concerned with his Jhallor. What does he care whether *dharma* is destroyed or whether the flag over the temple of Somanath is dragged into dust? He is more concerned with being loyal to his world which he has given in return for the Hammir's money! He does not care for his family honour or his religion."

"But, my dear Chauhan, what shall we gain by allowing ourselves to be agitated?" asked Vimal.

"Ghogha Bapa will never let him enter the desert," asserted Samant.

"But suppose the invader does bypass Ghogha Bapa, what other route is there for him to take except through Marwad?" emphasised Vimal thoughtfully.

"But it is quite impossible that Ghogha Bapa should give way," Samant said.

"I am going from here to Marwad. Will you come with me?"

"No," replied Samant. "I must carry out Lord Somanath's command to warn Ghogha Bapa."

"If the Muslim wanted to march on Ghoghagadh, he should have arrived there long ago."

"In that case, rest assured he will have been destroyed."

"So much the better, then," said Vimal. "You must be feeling sleepy."

"No, not at all. I shall not get sleep today. I keep thinking again and again of our conversation with Wakpatiraj."

"You are very young. Such disappointments come one's way very often. Must one allow oneself to be influenced unduly? We must find some way out. Will you come with me tonight?"

"Where?" asked Samant, startled.

"To stop that Mukhi of Multan from going to Marwad," answered Vimal with a significant look.

"Now? At once? Right. Let's go."

"Get ready. Then I shall tell my men also to get ready. In the meantime, I will go and take leave of Wakpatiraj." With this remark, Vimal left Samant to take leave of the ruler.

Wakpatiraj was anxious to see these unwelcome guests depart. After pretending to be disappointed and, for the sake of politeness, pressing him to stay longer, he ordered the gates of the fortress to be opened to let them out.

Samant and Vimal travelled fast in order to catch up with Ajaypal, the Mukhi of Multan. The night was dark, but as they were travelling along a highway, they experienced no great difficulty in maintaining good speed.

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"Chauhan, it would be a good thing to let the Mukhi travel some distance away from Jhallor," said Vimal and added in a persuasive tone: "I have a request to make." There was a confident smile on his face as he spoke. Samant was already deeply impressed by Vimal and agreed to conform to the request readily.

"Look. The Mukhi is a very experienced and skilful man," Vimal began to pose the problem. "To turn him back or to stop him will be a difficult task. You come from a ruling family. In dealing with him, you will get trapped in no time."

"But if I do not utter a word!" said Samant. "I was amazed at the skill with which you handled Wakpatiraj. If Ghogha Bapa had found someone like you to be his minister, that would have been wonderful."

"But, you have not yet met my teacher from whom I have learnt all I know," said Vimal.

"So you also have a teacher?"

"I am a child before Damodar Mehta. He has only to open his mouth and he would get anyone to do whatever he wants him to do. In ten years I have never once seen him lose his temper."

"Really, but that's impossible! Can there be a man with any spirit who never gets angry?"

"Damodar Mehta never tires of telling our master that

the best ruler is he who knows how to be angry, but that minister is best who never loses his temper."

"So, you never get angry?"

"Sometimes I do and that is why I cannot claim to be the equal of my teacher. Had I been as good as he is, do you think that Wakpatiraj would have got away with saying 'no'?" Vimal smiled as he said this, while Samant looked upon this new friend of his with admiration.

At the first resting place, they halted for a while. On enquiry they learnt that the Mukhi had decided to encamp elsewhere. Vimal was pleased with this, for that meant that the Mukhi was that much farther away from Jhallor.

When they arrived at the second resting place, Vimal saw in the dim light of the late moon that a number of camels had been tied to their tethers. He was delighted. He would now have an opportunity to play his wits against the Mukhi's. The stakes were high. If he won, it would mean victory for Patan, and for Lord Somanath.

However, when he reached the resting place, the Mukhi's caravan had just begun to move out.

He said to the leader of the caravan: "Please wait. I have brought for the Mukhi of Multan a message from the Ruler of Jhallor."

An old warrior of enormous size who was about to

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ride his camel, came forward. His eyes were suspicious as he inquired, "Who are you? Where have you come from?"

"I am coming from Jhallor. This prince accompanying me is Samantsingh Chauhan, Wakpatiraj's nephew. I wish to speak to you in confidence." As he said this Vimal got down from his camel, and bowed to the old warrior with folded hands courteously. "You seem to distrust me," he remarked dryly.

With suspicious eyes and unsmiling face, the Mukhi continued for some moments to stare at this gentle voiced individual. Vimal took him away a short distance from the others and said in a soft voice, "I have just left the Ruler of Jhallor. You met him earlier, gave him some presents, and although he was unwilling to give you permission to go through his territory, he promised you that he would not resist you in any way. Are you satisfied now? If you think that I am not speaking the truth, please ask the Chauhan Prince."

Mukhi's suspicions were lulled a little, but he still asked, "Why has Wakpatiraj sent you?"

"Wakpatiraj felt that Ranmal Rathod of Marwad may not accept your word unless it is corroborated. So he has sent us. We can assure him that it is Wakpatiraj's intention not to fight."

"What is the need of giving them any assurance?" asked the Mukhi once again suspiciously.

“Only this, that King Bheem of Anhilwad Patan has requested him to join him in resisting the invader.” Vimal moved his first pawn with some courage.

“Is that so?” asked the Mukhi.

“Yes. Come, let us get along,” said Vimal with eagerness. “We shall come with you to advise Rathod to turn down Bheemdev’s request.”

“All right,” said the Mukhi dryly and mounted his camel. Both the caravans moved forward.

It was clear that the Mukhi was still distrustful. He watched Vimal closely through half-closed eyes. He did not talk much and gave no encouragement to Vimal to talk.

For a long time, the silence of the night was broken only by the sound of the footfalls of the camels. True to his word, Samant remained silent. Vimal kept his camel by the side of the Mukhi’s. Each one of them was keeping a close watch on the other. As time passed, Vimal’s impatience increased. The night was slowly turning into early dawn. Vimal felt he could no longer remain inactive, as opportunity was slipping out of his hands with every minute.

He saw the Mukhi dozing in the cool breeze of the morning. This was the time for action: it was now or never. He brought his camel close to the Mukhi’s and then after giving his men the pre-arranged signal, immediately attacked the Mukhi with his sword.

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To Vimal's amazement he found that the Mukhi was very far from being asleep. His eyes were now wide open, and having parried Vimal's attack, he pointed his sword straight at Vimal's chest. Vimal realised that the old man had been ready for the attack. With great presence of mind, before the old man could run him through, he slipped down to the ground from the camel. The Mukhi too jumped after him.

Seeing Vimal draw his sword, his soldiers, who were following him, immediately fell upon the Mukhi's men. Soon the skirmish turned into a serious conflict.

It was Samant's quick action which saved Vimal. Just as the Mukhi's long sword was about to fall upon Vimal, Samant stabbed the Mukhi with his dagger. The old warrior's sword fell from his hand and soon he himself tottered to the ground.

Vimal immediately stood up only to find that three of the Mukhi's men had surrounded him. But by this time, Samant was ready to come to Vimal's assistance. A fierce battle now waged around the Mukhi's body.

A number of men were injured or killed. The delicate looking Vimal fought with great skill and agility. Samant spread terror among the enemy.

The wounded Mukhi opened his eyes, and seeing Vimal fighting close to him, mustered all his great strength, seized the sword which was lying near him, and raising

himself on one hand, with the other he aimed his sword at Vimal.

Fortunately Samant saw what was happening, and with a fierce cry, he jumped upon the Mukhi and pierced his body mortally.

Samant's shout attracted everyone's attention towards the Mukhi. When his men saw that he was dead, they lost heart, and ran away from the battlefield.

"Well done, Chauhan, well done," said Vimal to Samant, who had now saved his life twice. Samant's gaze was concentrated on the Mukhi. "This is how all enemies of Lord Somanath will be killed!" he exclaimed. With the right of the conqueror, he took away from Mukhi's waist a diamond-studded dagger and struck it in his belt.

"Now the message of Wakpatiraj of Jhallor will go no further," said Vimal with a laugh.

Nine of the Mukhi's men were killed and three were seized. Samant and Vimal also lost seven of their men and four were wounded. Only four, including both Samant and Vimal, were unhurt. Samant was now impatient to go forward.

"Chauhan," said Vimal, "twice you have saved my life. I am at your service. There is nothing that I would not do for you."

"My dear Vimal," replied Samant affectionately, "you

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are my beloved friend. Treat Ghoghagadh as your own home."

"And if you come to Gujarat, do not forget me."

The two embraced each other and set out towards their respective destinations.

Vimal took along with himself the three men of the Mukhi's whom he had taken prisoner. When he had extracted information out of them about the army of Hammir of Garjan, his anxiety grew, for what he learnt was startling. Hammir's army consisted of thirty thousand horsemen, fifty thousand men armed with bows and arrows, and three hundred elephants. Thirty thousand camels carried their water supply. In addition, there were thousands of non-combatants. It was as if a whole country was on the march!

Vimal was astonished when he heard of the size of Garjan's forces. At first he had laughed it away as gross exaggeration, but what he had heard continued to trouble him all the way.

16.

SOLITUDE OF THE DESERT

AFTER he said farewell to Vimal, Samant was in an exuberant mood. He had gained his first victory against the Hammir of Garjan. "That is a good omen," he said to himself.

He had retained two men with himself, and of these, one was slightly wounded. All the other wounded retainers and the prisoners he had left to Vimal's care, because he was anxious to reach Ghoghagadh as speedily as possible.

He was able to make progress without undue discomfort, as there were many resting places along the route. For three days, he encountered no one, but on the fourth day, for the first time, he met some wayfarers. Some rode camels, a few rode horses and the rest were on foot.

On inquiry they told him that they were running away from their homes to Marwad through fear of the Hammir.

On closer inquiry, he heard information of a contradictory nature; some said that the Muslim invader had already arrived at Sapaldaksha, others that he was only two days' journey away; some who were imaginative, claimed

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that the invader had camels that flew in the air, while others said that at his bidding new streams of fresh water had sprung up in the desert. However, it was clear that the invader was daily coming nearer, and the people were leaving their homes to escape him.

After two days further journey, Samant saw that the number of refugees began to increase. It seemed as if whole villages, men, women and children, with their horses, cattle and goats were being evacuated, everyone carrying as much of his belongings as he could.

Stories regarding the invader became more and more fantastic. The Hammir was said to be fierce-looking and, to have three eyes and eight hands and a sword six cubits long. Some even gave detailed descriptions of the army of Hammir! Some claimed to have seen flying elephants and horses, and giants with two mouths eating up human beings. Some others described how the sky darkened when the Hammir advanced and lightning flashed every time he drew out his dagger.

Samant tried his best to sort out the truth of these fanciful reports. All he could infer was that while no one knew enough, almost all agreed that the invader had got past Sapaldaksha (Ajmere). If that was correct, it would mean that he had either conquered Ghoghagadh or bypassed it. Samant began to be worried seriously about what might have happened at Ghoghagadh: the refugees had transmitted to him some of the fear that had made them flee.

Samant's anxiety and fears, not for himself but for his

family, made him impatient to reach his destination. He felt certain that his father was waiting for him at the fort of Bhamaria. But everything now seemed uncertain and Samant could not for the life of him judge what was happening or would happen.

For eight long days, he kept meeting refugees. On the ninth day, the traffic became thinner. By the eleventh day there was hardly anyone visible. The villages he passed through lay deserted and empty. No traveller was to be seen at resting places on the way. Fear seemed to stalk the entire countryside.

Samant refused to speculate as to what might have happened and he moved forward with speed. Even if the God of Death himself came his way, he would face Him. After all, he was a Chauhan!

For two more days he travelled through a totally deserted countryside. Even a burning ground would be less lonely!

On the fifteenth day, his wounded companion suddenly became seriously ill. It was impossible to think of taking him along, and so Samant left his other retainer behind to look after the ailing one. The two men did their best to persuade him to wait until they could go with him, but he was adamant; he went forward alone. An unknown fear was on him. Rather than remain much longer in this state of uncertainty, he preferred to rush into the area of danger. In two days he hoped to arrive at Bhamaria; there his father would be waiting

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for him, and then, together they would proceed to Ghoghagadh as quick as possible.

On the first of the two remaining days, Samant travelled at a slow speed in the hope that his men might be able to resume the journey and catch up with him. Several times he heard, or imagined he heard, the footsteps of camels, but each time, in spite of a long and careful examination of the horizon, he could see nothing!

It was a terrifying loneliness. For hours on end, there was nothing to be seen, nothing to break the monotony, except whirling spirals of sand or an occasional palm tree, an uninhabited cottage or a small monument of some brave warrior fallen on the field of battle.

On his way out to Somanath, he had met many caravans along the very stretch of this highly frequented route. From villages on either side he had heard the sound of barking dogs, and at the resting places, he had met groups of cowherds sitting and gossiping. Today there was not a sign of either a human being or an animal.

This utter loneliness was awe-inspiring. His heart beat fast. Never before had he experienced such stark, frightening oppressive solitude.

He felt like shouting to break the silence—and he did so with trepidation. Though it was not a full-blooded shout, its echo came back to him! He looked around with a palpitating heart; with a silent prayer to God Somanath, he urged his camel forward.

When he arrived at a large resting place, he thought hopefully that there at last he might meet someone. Bhamaria was not very far now and it was possible that his father might be on his way to it. But what if his father had already arrived and gone to meet Ghogha Bapa? Then his father would win the bet and he would lose. Anyway their relatives and friends would wait for him eagerly and listen to the story of his terrifying journey through the desert and they would feel proud of him.

He had seen men running away from the Hammir of Garjan. But where was he? Were all these people fools? How could the invader advance so far without fighting Ghogha Bapa?

He rested the whole of the afternoon while such thoughts occupied his mind. In his childhood he had often heard stories of large cities destroyed by wicked demons: this resting place reminded him of them. There was water in the well; the leather bucket lay unused. There was an idol in the temple, but unworshipped for several days. There were three cottages nearby, clean and whole, but not a soul to occupy them.

After a while his fear left him and he grew angry at his own cowardliness. He was a Chauhan, grandson of Ghogha Bapa, and a messenger of Lord Somanath. How could he lose courage in this way? He bit his lips in anger and prepared to leave.

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He must go to Ghoghagadh. It did not matter even if thousands of Garjan's soldiers stood between him and Ghoghagadh.

He had not proceeded very far before he saw a cloud of sand travelling towards him. That could only mean one thing—a traveller. How many days was it since he had seen any human being? What if he was an enemy? Even an enemy was a human being and so welcome. He could raise his voice in battle. If he was wounded he would inflict wounds in return. He ultimately inspected his bow and arrow, loosened his sword in its scabbard and checked the dagger stuck in his waistband.

As the cloud came nearer, he discerned two riders on their camels. Samant was overjoyed. The men were coming towards him swiftly. Like a thirsty person rushing towards water, he hastened towards them. He called out to them. They answered his call. The sound of their voices filled Samant with pleasure. He regained his courage and smiling at his own momentary weakness, moved forward.

17.

THE FORT OF BHAMARIA

THE two men were Rajput warriors, both well armed. One was middle-aged and the other young. The older man called out to Samant in a loud voice, "Who are you?" Simultaneously, the younger warrior drew his sword.

Samant responded in an equally loud voice with the traditional greeting, "Jaya Somanath," and he too held his sword at the ready.

"Where are you going?"

"Ghoghagadh," replied Samant.

By this time the men had approached quite close to Samant. "Where are you coming from? From Jhallor?"

"Why do you ask so many questions?" asked Samant, annoyed at this attempt at cross-examination.

The newcomers were able to identify Samant by the manner in which his turban was tied.

"Chauhan," they said, "did you hear anything about the Hammir's army?"

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Samant was startled. "No, but who are you?"

"We are coming from Ghor Bitali. You did not meet his army on the way? That is surprising. Where has it disappeared?"

"How should I know? I saw only deserted villages and unoccupied houses."

"But then where could the Hammir be?" inquired the older warrior of his companion.

"Where did you see the Hammir?" inquired Samant.

The older Rajput smiled a cruel smile as he replied: "We have not met him anywhere."

"Has he not moved out of Multan?"

The two newcomers laughed mirthlessly. Samant was puzzled.

The older Rajput came nearer and looked at Samant affectionately. "My brother," he said in a compassionate and affectionate voice, "Why are you going to Ghoghagadh?"

"Why am I going?" exclaimed Samant proudly. "That is my home. I am Ghogha Bapa's grandson. If I am not to go there, where else would I go?"

The two newcomers looked at each other enigmatically. The older Rajput brought his camel close to Samant's and put his hand affectionately on his back.

"Chauhan, when did you leave Ghoghagadh?"

"Why? I was there less than three months ago."

"Sir," the older warrior remarked sadly, "during these three months, terrible things have happened. Why not come with us?"

"Why? What has happened? Who are you?" asked Samant. Fear had again got a grip over him as a result of what he read in the Rajput's face and voice.

"It is better for you not to know. You had better drop the idea of going forward. Go back. Chauhan, in these three months, everything in the world has become topsyturvy."

"But why do you give such advice? What has happened?"

"Why should anything happen? Our greatest hope is shattered." Tears came into the eyes of the older Rajput as he said this. "Balamdev, the great hero of Chauhans, is killed. With him died 50,000 young and brave warriors. Sapaldaksha has been laid barren. Prince Sarangdev and Rao Lakhan have escaped to Ghor Bitali. The Hammir has won. The Rajputs are defeated."

"And where is the invader?"

"He must have thought it inadvisable to attack Ghor Bitali, for he has penetrated into the desert. Where exactly he is, nobody knows."

"I assure you they haven't passed through here. I am coming straight from Jhallor."

"Then Hammir has escaped us!" said the older Rajput turning to the younger one. And then addressing Samant, he

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said, "Sir, we urge you to come with us. Sarangdev Bapu will welcome you with open arms."

"No, I am sorry. I must go quickly to Ghogha Bapa."

"Take our advice and come with us," the younger Rajput sought to persuade Samant.

"How can I do that? I have been ordered to go straight to Ghoghagadh, and I cannot disobey. Before nightfall I shall get to Bhamaria."

"No, sir. Please do not go forward."

"I must go."

"Under whose orders are you?" asked the younger warrior.

"Whose? Lord Somanath's."

"What are your orders?" said the older Rajput as he tried to stop Samant's camel. Samant became suspicious of the two Rajputs. Why were they trying to stop him? Was there a conspiracy? Had they perhaps been sent by the Muslim invader?

"What I have to say is meant only for Ghogha Bapa, and is not to be conveyed to anyone else," said Samant as he drove his camel forward. He was eager and impatient. Ghoghagadh was now only a short distance away. How could he turn back now?

The older Rajput's eyes filled with tears. He sighed as he looked at his younger companion, whose eyes, too, had

tears in them. For a long time, they looked with great sorrow at Samant as he rode forward enthusiastically.

Samant met no one on the way until Bhamaria came within sight. He had thus plenty of time to collect his thoughts. Multan was obviously in the hands of the Hammir. Sapaldaksha had fallen. The great Chauhan warrior Balamdev was dead. The Hammir had bypassed Ghor Bitali and gone into the desert in a direction no one seemed to know. The villages along the way had been evacuated and lay deserted.

What could have happened to Ghoghagadh? That was on the way from Multan to Sapaldaksha. Could the Muslim have destroyed Ghoghagadh also? Or could he have bypassed it and gone on straight to Sapaldaksha? What was the fate of Ghogha Bapa? What had happened to his father? Again he became uneasy with inexplicable fear. He turned his eyes on the horizon, and prayed to Lord Somanath. What could possibly happen to him and his family while they were engaged in carrying out the behest of Lord Mahadeo himself?

His initial enthusiasm had begun to wane, and his hopes were turning to depression. As soon as the fort of Bhamaria became visible, he felt hope stir in his heart again. But it lasted only a short while. Over the fort he saw a large number of vultures flying. And his heart sank within himself.

In the middle of the desert, six hundred feet above ground level, alone in its grandeur, stood the fort of Bhamaria. The silence all around was frightening. Even the vultures had

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decided to fly away elsewhere leaving the entire area dead and lifeless.

Bhamaria was an outpost of Ghoghagadh. A company of Rajputs under a leader was stationed there. The only other occupants were a few cowherds. There was a small palace for Ghogha Bapa's use, and there was also a temple dedicated to Lord Somanath. Passing caravans halted there and enjoyed Ghogha Bapa's hospitality. It was always crowded.

Today with its gates open, it looked fearful in its solitude. There was neither a traveller nor a camel standing in front of the gates.

Samant looked up with tear-filled eyes. The banner of Lord Somanath, which always fluttered over the fort, had disappeared. Samant felt faint with fear. He wiped away his tears and looked again. Bhamaria, bereft of its glory, was like a widow. Stifling a sob, he ran his camel towards the gates.

There prevailed the quiet of the burial ground: his camel and he were the only living things in sight. The gate stood as solid as ever but open like the mouth of a fearful cavern. The walls of the fort were intact, but no human being could be seen. The camel climbed rapidly up to the fort; no sound was heard except its heavy breathing.

Samant discovered that a door of the gate had been forcibly broken open. When he went inside, he found everything empty and quiet. A bat flew out. Everything was

exactly as it should be except that there was not a living soul around. Samant got down from his camel and led her in.

The commandant's house was open. As he stood in the doorway, he heard an odd sound in the midst of the total silence that prevailed. A large rat was nibbling at something. It impertinently stared at him for some time and then sneaked away into its hole. Samant, aghast, could not bring himself even to call out to the commandant. He walked away.

Every now and again he looked behind to see if he was followed. He became afraid of his own footsteps. He felt his heart beat as loud as a blow from a hammer. Once the leaves of a tree rustled and he was startled. He called out involuntarily, "Who is there?" From the surrounding empty buildings, there came back only the echo "Who is there?"

Samant thought of his father who had promised to wait for him here. "O God, my father, my father," he called out tearfully. Only echoes answered him and the sound of his voice slowly faded into silence. Leaving his camel to look after itself, he rushed into the temple.

He began to tremble partly from fear and partly from anger when he saw that the flag-post of the temple was broken. Someone had destroyed the golden copula on the spire of the temple. The beautiful black marble bull inside the temple lay broken into pieces.

He felt as if his whole world had been destroyed. His eyes grew red with fear and anxiety. His breath came fast

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and short, and he felt faint. He entered the temple and shouted, "Shambho, Shambho, Shambho" as if calling Lord Somanath in bitter helplessness. From the temple came back the echo "Shambho, Shambho, Shambho."

He went right up to the image of the Lord. His eyes dim with tears, he could barely see. He threw himself down in front of the image, for this was his family deity. This was his Father, his Lord, to whom he turned now for solace. Sobbing aloud, he remained lying on the ground for a long time, his head resting on the rocky floor. Then he stood up.

By now his eyes had become accustomed to the darkness inside the temple. He looked around him, and what he saw was so stunning that he let out a loud scream.

The image of the Lord lay broken in pieces. Like a mad man he screamed aloud, once, twice, three times. He felt faint and giddy. He tried to support himself against the wall, but he slumped and fell.

As he fell, he had the vision of an old man standing behind the broken image with a lamp in his hand. Dimly he realised that he had seen the old man somewhere but where and in what circumstances he could not recall. A bat flew in and struck against him. He let out a loud scream and lost consciousness.

18.

GHOUGHAGADH FACES THE STORM

IN his fevered imagination, Samant saw a beautiful and delicate young woman smiling at him and applying the holy ashes to his forehead with her gentle hand. She seemed to be saying to him in her sweet voice, "My brave friend, come back soon."

His head was still throbbing with pain, though the pain now was not as intense. Someone was trying to make him drink from a cup. Whose hand was it? Whose but hers, for who else could think of bringing peace to his throbbing head? He seized the hand firmly. So long as he lived, he would not let go of that hand.

Another hand stroked his forehead gently. He tried to open his eyes, but failed. He wanted to see that face once again, that beautiful, bright face. But amazingly, whenever he tried to see the face, it turned into the face of a bearded old man. It was a familiar face of someone whom he knew. Its small eyes were looking at him with affection and there were tears in them.

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With great difficulty he opened his eyes and was able to recognise the face. It belonged to Nandidutt, the family priest of the ruling family from whom he had learnt to read and write and from whom he had learnt religious precepts. "Rajguru!" he called. There was severe pain in his waist and he could not immediately sit up. Nandidutt helped him up gently. He looked around him, dazed and bewildered.

Was this the fort of Bhamaria into which he had entered? Was this the temple of Shiva? Was this the place where he had seen the image broken into pieces? The old Rajguru was looking at him. Except for him everything was as lifeless as before.

"Son, be at ease. Much has happened and much remains to be done. Don't be impatient," the old man said.

"Rajguru, please tell me what has happened. Why is this fortress in this condition. Why is this temple, why is everything—in ruins? Will Ghogha Bapa speak no more?"

"My son, there is nothing you can do but to be patient. A great destroyer has descended on the world! Of what remains of it, there are only you and I."

"But please tell me where is Ghogha Bapa?"

"My master; the valorous Ghogha Bapa is in heaven."

"And what about the others? Why is this fortress so deserted? Tell me, tell me quickly."

"I shall tell you, if you have the strength to listen."

"I have. I want to hear everything that happened."

"Then listen. You will hear a tale which you could hardly have imagined. But first drink this medicine. It will give you some peace. And drink this *asava* also."

Samant did as he was told, and until he had finished, Nandidutt kept looking at him with affection. Then he began:

"Samant, though it breaks my heart to talk about it, I must do so. Perhaps such a tale has never before been written or heard. The fame of the Suryavamshis (the descendants of the Sun-god) has always remained bright. But that is nothing compared to Ghogha Bapa's bravery. I was destined—unfortunate as I am—to have the entire epic enacted before my eyes and to have lived to tell it to you."

The impatient Samant intervened, "Please, Rajguru, tell me everything that occurred since I went away."

"Do you remember, I had come out here to bid farewell to you and your father? I went then to Ghogha Bapa and for a long time we talked about the two of you. Bapa was firm in his conviction that the two of you would bring great credit to the family."

"And then?"

"A few days later we heard that the Hammir of Garjan was coming down with a large army in order to destroy Lord Somanath's temple. We laughed a lot when we heard of his approach" Rajguru sighed as he said this. "Ghogha Bapa twirled his moustache and, with a derisive laugh, said:

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'We'll take you on, invader. There is Bhimpal in Lohkot to welcome you warmly. And Ajaysinh in Multan to take care of you. I am at the gateway to the desert. And in Sapaldaksha (Ajmere) is my great cousin Bheemdev. If you dare to come, we shall teach you a lesson that you'll never forget!' "

"And then?" asked Samant.

"Within a few days, there came the first bad news. Jaypal's son Bhimpal sold himself to the invader. That coward let the Hammir pass through his territory without hindrance. He saved his skin to sell his world." The old man shook his head gently. Samant also sat speechless: he too had known examples of such cowardice.

"And, then," continued Nandidutt, "Multan also welcomed the invader. The descendants of the Sun and the Moon surrendered abjectly. For days the Hammir of Garjan rested and enjoyed himself in Multan. The Rajputs, instead of protecting Brahmins and cows, as was their duty, joined forces with the enemy. The Hammir, the invader, then sent a message to Ghogha Bapa."

"What was that?"

"We were in the royal fort when the message arrived. From the day that the foreign hordes had entered Multan, Ghogha Bapa had become silent and ceased talking to anyone. You know what he looked like when he was angry! His eyes flashed like lightning, but he kept his lips sealed.

Whenever he was very angry, no one except myself could dare to speak to him; on this occasion not even I could dare."

"But tell me, what happened when those messengers came."

"There were two men: one was a young man—Salar Masud, tall, powerful and proud; the other was a middleaged man who had betrayed his country and his religion."

"A Rajput?"

"No. He was a barber by birth, but by serving the Hammir, he had achieved a certain status. He worked as interpreter; his name was Tilak. He walked up to us and placed in front of Ghogha Bapa a big tray full of diamonds and pearls. For a long time Ghogha Bapa looked at him without speaking. I asked why they had come and what was the meaning of the tray.

"With folded hands, Tilak said in a humble voice: 'Ghogha Rana, Sultan Yaminudaula Mohamood of Garjan has sent this present to you as mark of his admiration for a brave man.' Ghogha Bapa's moustaches bristled as he heard this. But from his lips came forth not even a word.

"I intervened and asked on what mission he had come. And Tilak replied, again with folded hands and in a humble voice: 'Hammir of Garjan requests the Ruler of Ghoghagadh that he may be allowed passage through the desert to Prabhas.'

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"He had barely finished speaking when Ghogha Bapa put his hand to his moustache. His eyes had begun to shine brightly. I felt that sparks would begin to fly any moment. He who had not bowed to anyone in 80 years, would he bow now to this foreigner?

"Bapa's hand continued to twirl his moustache, while Tilak stood with folded hands, waiting for the reply. There was a short silence during which no one spoke. Ghogha Bapa answered in a voice resembling thunder before the storm, 'Your Hammir wants me to let him go through my territory in order to destroy Lord Somanath, and this present, I understand, is the price.'

"While Salar Masud kept twirling his moustache, Tilak replied, 'Yes, Bapa.'

"And then, like lightning piercing the sky, Ghogha Bapa roared: 'Go. Tell your master that as long as Ghogha Bapa has one drop of blood in him, he will not let him go through the desert.' And then he kicked the tray of diamonds and pearls which was in front of him, scattering the contents far away."

"Well done," interjected Samant.

"At that time Ghogha Bapa looked like Shiva, the destroyer of the earth. His eyes shone brilliantly, his face was firm as a rock, and in his arms was the strength of Parashuram, the Rama of the Battle-Axe. He left the court without uttering one further word. The messengers stood there, looking uncomfortably at each other.

"For fifteen days we prepared ourselves for the inevitable battle. We repaired the fort. We got our weapons ready. We listened to the minstrels singing songs of our past glory. The warriors were ready for the fray. The young women vied with one another in encouraging their husbands to fight valiantly. I offered prayers in the temple.

"One day we were standing on the top of the fort looking in the direction of Multan, when we saw on the horizon the great army of Hammir of Garjan moving forward like a giant python. I was terrified. I had never imagined that there could be an army of such a size. I looked at Ghogha Bapa. His eyes had become fierce and his right arm began to fondle his sword. 'Bapa,' I remarked, 'I had not thought that the Hammir's army would be as big as this.'

"Ghogha Bapa laughed aloud as he remarked, 'Nandidutt, so long as the Lord God who holds the trident in His hand, is on our side, who can do harm to us?' Then turning in the direction from which the army was coming, he seized my hand, and said, 'Brahmadev, you are our family priest. Because of your blessings, we continue to flourish. Promise me one thing.'

"I gave him the promise. And then Ghogha Bapa said to me in slow measured tone, 'Whatever happens, I will not change my decision one little bit. I will not allow the Hammir to use one inch of my territory. If I die, see that I am cremated and tell my son Sajjan and my grandson Samant to perform my funeral ceremonies at Gaya.'

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"I hesitated. If he whom I had served all my life were to die, why should I continue to live? But I did not like to disobey Bapa. And so I gave my promise, and Bapa, with a joyful heart and a spring in his steps, went out to get his men ready for the coming battle."

"What happened then?" asked Samant.

"Who could resist fate? In the fort there were eight hundred Rajputs, three hundred others and seven hundred women. And facing this small group was an army of thousands.

"The Hammir once again sent his negotiator Tilak to Ghogha Bapa. He pleaded: 'Why do you rush headlong into the jaws of death?' But once Ghogha Bapa had made up his mind, he would never resile from it. Was he going to turn over a new leaf now? 'Ever since I was born,' he answered, 'I have been prepared for death. Come along, my son. If you have the courage, let the fight begin.'

"And then the gates of the fort were closed. Down in the plains, Hammir stood wondering what he should do. His large army was amazed at Ghogha Bapa's audacious decision. Soon evening fell and we were all wondering what Hammir would do next. No one had dared to make a frontal attack on Ghoghagadh. No elephant or horse could climb its steep sides, while its high walls made it impossible for the foe to scale them or to shoot their arrows inside."

Samant sat listening with rapt attention to the old man's narration.

"We saw that Hammir was baffled. It would take him years to conquer Ghoghagadh and his mission of desecrating Somanath would remain unfulfilled. All night there was much movement in his camp. Torches flitting, horses running, drums beating there was great activity. At dawn, the mighty army began to move towards the desert, skirting the fort. The Hammir had admitted defeat. Ghoghagadh remained as it ever was, unconquerable, unbeatable. The triumphant 'Har Har Mahadev' which emerged from every throat inside the fort must have shaken the Muslim army.

"Ghogha Bapa's ire was beyond control. His moustache bristled angrily, and his hand clasped and unclasped his sword. 'Cowards,' he roared, 'you wish to escape?'

"We guessed what was passing in his mind. He wanted to attack the Hammir's army and destroy it. The women were terrified. The Chauhan warriors were dumbfounded. We mused: We are only a few, the Muslims are a thousand times our number. Lord Mahadev had saved us. Why should we now court death? My mind was a blank and I sat praying to Lord Shiva to protect his devotees."

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NANDIDUTT, the family priest of Ghogha Bapa, continued: "Then, as if inspired by God Somanath, Ghogha Bapa said, 'For ninety years have I offered worship to Lord Somanath. For seventy years I have ruled over this desert land; not even a bird has dared to move within my kingdom without my permission. Do you expect me to stand by and let this infidel go his way to desecrate Lord Somanath? You are a disgrace to your great tradition! You may stay here and enjoy the fruits of your cowardice. All my life I have proclaimed "Victory to Lord Somanath," and so long as I live, Lord Somanath shall always remain victorious.'

"The commander of the fort with folded hands and trembling lips, urged, 'Bapa, the enemies are so numerous that in no time we shall all be killed.'

"And what he said was absolutely true; but what was Ghogha Bapa's reaction? He stood up erect, and it seemed to me as if he would hit the man. He roared like a lion, 'You fool! Only cowards say the enemies are many and we are

few. Today the Hammir is running away, evading me. What right have you or I to live if we are not able to discharge the duty entrusted to us by Lord Somanath? God had sent us here and it is God who is calling us back. Be ready.'

"And with these rousing words, Ghogha Bapa drew out his sword which shone like lightning in the darkness. And I, repeating 'Bravo! Bravo!' was momentarily blinded by it. None dared challenge Ghogha Bapa's words. Every member of his family stood ready at attention and all the womenfolk shouted in unison 'Victory.' For my part I could only recite the name of Lord Shiva, seeking His protection for them all.

"Instantly there was bustle and activity. War-drums called the warriors to arms. The camels neighed with excitement. Samant, it was a sight for the gods to see! Tears of joy came into my eyes and through them I saw Shiva and Parvati showering flowers upon them from the heavens.

"Ghogha Bapa dressed himself in his finest clothes, tied a saffron-coloured turban round his head and wore a garland of red flowers. Every brave Chauhan donned his battledress. I offered worship to God and then placed the auspicious red mark on each warrior's forehead. I blessed them, and wished victory to Ghogha Bapa.

"As they neared the gate, Bapa called me to him and said in a loud voice for everybody to hear, 'Nandidutt, your father anointed me and placed on me the auspicious mark when I ascended the throne. Today you have anointed me

on my journey to heaven. Now, promise me this. When all the Chauhan warriors are dead, see that their wives as *Satis* (dedicated wives) are offered in sacrifice to the God of Fire.'

"Then, turning towards the womenfolk who were standing on the palace balconies, he said, 'My dear children, have you the courage to accompany me to Kailas, the abode of the Lord?'

"He said this cheerfully as if he was inviting them to a marriage ceremony. Acceptance of the invitation was clearly visible on their beautiful, beaming faces. Everyone's eyes were filled with tears of joy. The brave warriors shouted, 'Victory to Somanath' and moved forward.

"The gates were opened to allow the glorious Chauhan warriors to sally forth. The rising sun's golden rays played upon their brilliant turbans and shining swords as they rode down the ramparts of the fort on their horses and camels. From the top of the fort, with my old eyes, I watched this magnificent scene, this march to victory and death. For the sake of his honour, the ruler of the desert had decided to sacrifice his entire clan. 'Bravo, Ghogha Bapa, well done,' I whispered to myself.

"The gods appeared to shower flowers and blessings upon these brave men. At that moment, Ghogha Bapa, who was at the head of the little army, turned round and looked straight at me.

“The spell-bound army of the Hammir watched this scene with amazement and admiration. At first they could not understand why Ghogha Bapa was coming after them, but they quickly realised that the Chauhan warriors were rushing towards them to do or to die, to kill or to be killed. The enemies raised the cry of ‘Allahho Akbar’ and prepared themselves for the onslaught.

“The Hammir, with his red beard and green turban, riding on his elephant, was easily recognisable. Shouting aloud, as he rode into the enemy, Ghogha Bapa killed all who came in his way. He spread terror in whichever direction he moved; but it could not last and soon he was laid low.”

Nandidutt was overwhelmed as that scene came back to his mind. He burst out crying. Samant was too horrified to do more than stare vacantly.

Nandidutt continued. “As he fell, many enemy swords pierced his body. As soon as I saw him fall, I hurried from the fort to carry out the task I had promised. I went straight into the temple of Lord Somanath where everyone had assembled. Among them were some terrified shopkeepers and servants. I arranged for them to be sent away by the rear gate. Although my own son knew nothing of the use of weapons, I had sent him into the battle with Ghogha Bapa. If a *Guru* can show his disciples the way to heaven when they are alive, should he not keep them company when they die?

"I was the only male now left in the fort. I had to do my duty, however unpleasant. I hardened my heart. It was my fate that I should live to see all these terrible things."

Nandidutt was overcome once again by the memory of those terrible events and broke down. Samant was so weighed down with sorrow that he was bereft of tears.

After a while, Nandidutt resumed.

"Then, my son, what I had to do, I did with trembling hands. In the courtyard of the temple, sandalwood was stacked ready to be lit into blazing fires. Young women at whose marriage I had myself presided, whose children I had taught, came out dressed in all their finery. They came and touched my feet. My eyes were so overflowing with tears that I could hardly see, yet I applied the auspicious red marks upon their foreheads and cheeks.

"They offered worship to the Sun-god, to their family god and then, with a smile on their faces, entered the fire. These heroic women performed *jauhar* bravely and cheerfully. Oh God! I, their teacher, their father, had lived to perform their obsequies! I kept reciting the name of Shambhu, and urged Him to sustain me till my duty was done. Within no time whatsoever, all that bravery, that beauty, was turned into ashes. Unable to bear their screams, I ran into the temple and I fell at the feet of Lord Somanath. I wished I could have died then and there; but Ghogha

Bapa had bound me by promise, and I had to live to tell you and your father everything that had happened. But, oh my God, why did You not call me to You at that very moment and release me from my promise?"

Nandidutt was unable to speak any more. It took him some little time to regain his composure and resume his narrative.

"Samant, I then went again to the top of the fortress and looked down only to find that not one of Ghogha Bapa's brave men was left alive. Each one of them had performed miracles of bravery before surrendering himself to his God. A company of Hammir's soldiers was getting ready to take possession of the fort. I thought this was the end for me, but I remembered that there was a secret room from which there was an arrangement to escape. I went and shut myself into it.

"The soldiers came in shouting 'Allahho Akbar'. They must have thought that there would be some people inside the fort, and lest they might be ambushed, they entered the fort slowly and cautiously. They were amazed to find complete quiet reigning in the deserted fort. They spread out in various directions and finally entered the courtyard of the temple. From my little peep-hole, I saw that they beheld the still burning fire, and the corpses of the six hundred brave women. The sight was gruesome enough to unnerve the toughest and they ran. But there were two who thought that

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enough havoc had not been wrought. They entered the temple itself and tore it down to shreds. They broke into pieces the image of Lord Shankar. Oh, my Lord, why did You keep me alive to see all this?" And once again Nandidutt burst into tears.

"At last they went away and the army marched ahead. Trembling and fearful, I came out because I still had my other duties to perform. My dear Samant, our Ghoghagadh was like a cemetery. Everything that we held dear, had been burnt to ashes, but I had still to see that Ghogha Bapa was properly cremated. He had done his duty—to die for the sake of his God. I had to do mine—to perform the rites after his death.

"I went down the fort with faltering steps. Hundreds of vultures hovered above the corpses. I discovered what the brave Rajputs had done! Each one of them had killed many enemy soldiers before he died. With great difficulty I found Ghogba Bapa's corpse and dragged it some distance from where I found it. I returned to the fort to fetch sandalwood and with that wood I cremated Ghogha Bapa. I could not remain there for long.

"In the whole ghastly atmosphere, I was the only one alive and I did not wish yet to die. I ran from there. Some refugees had pity on me as a poor Brahmin and brought me to Bhamaria."

"What happened to the Hammir's army?" asked Samant.

"The army did not come to Bhamaria, but took the highway to Sapaldaksha. A few of them must have come here, for no one else would have desecrated this temple. I decided to wait here. I was certain that either your father or you would come."

"Only the two of us remain, of Ghogha Bapa's family?" whispered Samant.

"Yes, my son. Only you and your father," the old Brahmin said with a sigh.

"And heaven alone knows what has happened to my father!"

The two, the old man and the young man, embraced each other and wept.

All night Samant walked to and fro in front of the half-destroyed temple. His love for his father, his sorrow, his anger and his passionate desire for revenge, all set his soul in flames.

Finally, Lord Somanath had pity upon the lonely young man, drowned in grief. He took away his immaturity at one stroke. When dawn came, Samant was still awake, staring fixedly and fiercely at the ground.

Nandidutt approached him softly and asked him what he was thinking about. Answered the young man who had become old overnight, with a cruel, cheerless smile: "What am I thinking about? I am thinking of going in search of my father. What do you propose to do?"

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"I would like to come with you if you would let me. Meeting you has given meaning to my being alive. My only ambition now is, if God spares me, to go to Prabhas and spend the rest of my life worshipping at the feet of Lord Somanath."

"Come with me then. Our destination is the same. Before we reach Somanath, we are certain to meet Hammir. Then it will be a question of whether he survives or I."

Within an hour or two, they were ready to leave Bhamaria in search of Samant's father and of the Hammir's army. They did not go back along the way that Samant had taken to Bhamaria. He recalled that his father had said that Bhamaria could be reached by a direct route from the temple of Goddess Ranathambhi. So he decided to take the same route.

Nandidutt also agreed, for he, too, recalled that when he was young, Ghogha Bapa had gone with his father along that route to Somanath.

But where was Sajjan? Why had he not arrived? Both of them could think of only one fearful answer.

20.

THE THIRD EYE OF THE LORD

LED by Sajjan Chauhan, Hammir Mohamood's army marched westwards. It continued to march day after day until the fourth day when the *rabaris* who were accompanying the army protested. They claimed that this could not be the right direction and that it could only lead to an impassable section of the desert where no one had been known to have gone before.

When these protests reached Salar Masud's ears, he immediately asked Sajjan for his explanation. But Sajjan was adamant. He had no doubt at all that the road he was following was the right road and that if they did not wish to follow him, they were free to go their way. His firmness completely reassured Masud.

On the fifth day, the sun was particularly hot. The horses were in dire distress, and even the toughest among the men were sorely tired. Discontent grew in the ranks. The Sultan could not afford to ignore it any more and he ordered that Sajjan should be produced before him. Sajjan

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again asserted his confidence. Experienced guides were called to cross-examine him, but they had to admit that Sajjan's knowledge of the desert far exceeded their own.

On the sixth day, however, everyone had lost faith in Sajjan. Even the camels refused to go on. The regular guides of the army reiterated that what they had been urging was correct, that they were moving towards an area where sandstorms normally prevailed. There were rumblings in the army. The soldiers from the north refused to proceed further. It looked as if there would be a revolt.

Sajjan nevertheless stood calm, composed and firm by the side of his dromedary Padamdi. He still did not have the slightest doubt that they were on the right road to Anhilwad. But except for Salar Masud, no one had any faith in him. In the evening, a strong wind started blowing and the atmosphere became heavily laden with sand. The elephants sat down and panted; many of the magnificent horses were in no better condition. The camels turned back. The men cried out for water.

At last the Sultan ordered a halt. He asked Masud to go forward one day's journey ahead with Sajjan and a few guides. They were to be followed by the rest of the army in three groups at a short distance between each, the last group along with the horses and elephants. Sajjan did not like this arrangement, but there was nothing he could do about it. He looked longingly westwards at the gathering clouds and began to pray: "Lord Somanath! Where are

your sandstorms? Why do you not send them without further delay?"

Salar Masud and Sajjan started on their reconnaissance mission. But they had hardly travelled for an hour or two when a terrific sandstorm made its appearance. With great difficulty, they were able to control their camels and to save themselves from being suffocated. Now at last even Salar felt that the view of the guides was correct. Sajjan was still firm, but Masud's faith began to waver.

Padamdi instinctively understood the situation. Where the other camels were reluctant to go, she moved forward with complete abandon. Sajjan taunted the other guides: if this Padamdi could go forward, what fear kept their camels back?

The sandstorm was coming from the western direction with ever-increasing force. Masud turned towards Sajjan with fierce eyes, but Sajjan was as calm and good-humoured as ever. To Masud's angry question, "Do you see what I see in front of me?" Sajjan calmly replied, "Yes. The sandstorm will soon pass away!"

The air became hotter. Eddying columns of sand were rushing towards them. Masud realised that he had been tricked.

"Who are you, you devil?" he shouted, as he raised his sword to attack Sajjan.

"Who am I?" answered Sajjan with a loud laugh. "Why? My Muslim friend, I am the son of Ghogha Bapa,

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the ruler of this desert. And there you see the third eye of Lord Somanath opening, the eye which destroys." As he said this, he pointed to the whirling columns.

Masud's personal guide translated Sajjan's remarks, but his anger was helpless before the impatience of his camel, which turned back and ran. Its example was followed instantaneously by all the other camels.

Padamdi, under Sajjan's stern order, stood still facing the oncoming storm with an expression of contempt. Sajjan looked on at the camels in full flight. He did not have much time to decide on his next step. Whichever way he turned, he had only death to face. If he went after Masud, he would be killed, and if he rode into the storm, he would be smothered. Padamdi's fierce and impatient scream warned him that the storm was barely five hundred feet away and would engulf them both in no time. Padamdi danced on four legs with impatience.

During that one terrible moment, his imaginations raised before him many scenes. He saw his father Ghogha Bapa standing erect in spite of his ninety years, watching with unconcealed delight his son's magnificent courage; his wife waiting for his return; his son, Samant, whom he loved more than his life, awaiting him, anxious for his safety; Gang Sarvagna in the temple of Somanath awaiting further developments with firm confidence; finally, Lord Somanath Himself enshrined in His magnificent temple, for the protection of which he was to sacrifice his life.

His heart swelled with pride. What no one else had been able to do, he had achieved single-handed. He had caused the destruction of a large part of the Hammir's army. Should Ghogha Bapa come to hear of his exploits, would he not speak glowingly of him? The tale of his achievements would be sung throughout the country and the world wherever they talked of courage and bravery.

The glare of the oncoming sandstorm was beginning to dazzle him. Padamdi was becoming impatient. Should they stay on and die? And then, as if in a mirage he saw the fierce face of Hammir, with his long beard and his green turban, his army suffocated by the enormous mass of whirling sand and dying in their thousands to provide food for the vultures hovering above.

He put an end to his day-dreaming and with a smile bent low and embraced and kissed Padamdi. "Come on, my Padamdi," said he affectionately, "turn back, my beloved, favoured of Lord Somanath, the Lord of the Universe, be my third eye." He turned the face of Padamdi away from the direction from which the sandstorm was coming and set out at the very last moment to outpace the storm.

Two of the camels from Masud's party fell down, but Masud had no time for the two unfortunate riders. His sole desire was to get back to his army and order it to run away from the storm as fast as possible. He soon caught up with the leading section of the army and directed it to turn back.

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He waited only to change over to a fresh camel, before going ahead to warn the second section of the army.

The Sultan himself was in the second section. Masud explained to him the situation as quickly as possible. There was no other course except to run. The Sultan, the great general that he was, had no difficulty in appreciating the danger, and he immediately arranged for rapid dispersal. He moved amongst his men and encouraged them.

The result was that the second section was able to retreat in some kind of order. Orders were also sent on immediately to the third section of the army to turn back in a disciplined manner.

Only the first section was in complete disorder. The Sultan and Masud tried their best to restore order; but no one was in a mood to listen to wise advice. The sandstorm was moving towards them with very great rapidity. The Sultan, realising his own danger, gave up further attempts at salvaging the first section and moved on with the second.

As they made their escape, they could not help looking backward to see whether they were outpacing the storm. They saw through the misty curtain, created by the brightly gleaming sand particles, a terrifying figure, as of the Sun-god himself, rushing towards them on a golden coloured camel. The rider's drawn sword shone brightly as he rushed on headlong at an amazing speed. The Hindus shouted '*Surya Narayana*' (Sun-god), the Muslims '*Shaitan*' and all threw

themselves face downwards on the ground to offer prayers for protection from destruction.

The terror-inspiring rider, who looked like the veritable god of sandstorms, rode on without stopping, calling out '*Jaya Somanath*' again and again. Standing upon a hillock, Sultan Mohamood also saw the rider and demanded, "Who is this? The Devil?" Masud replied, 'No, Sire. He is Ghogha Bapa's son.'

The Hammir of Ghaznee, himself a brave warrior, was struck speechless with admiration. He had seen one whole section of his army all but destroyed by the storm. He sighed deeply as he remarked, "Thank Allah that I had divided my troops into three sections and two have been spared." As he said this, he climbed down from his camel and on bending knees, offered his thanks to his God for His mercy.

When the storm had died down and calm had returned, it was as if there had never been any trouble! Everything all around was covered by sand several feet deep, and buried under this great volume of sand amid hundred's of soldiers were Sajjan and his beloved camel Padamdi. They had obtained eternal life in each other's embrace.

21.

SAMANT AND THE SULTAN

IT was the Sultan's great personality that made it possible for the troops to be reorganised rapidly, so that they could remain something like a disciplined army and resume their march. By covering only a few miles every day, by rationing water and food, by offering prayers day and night, by the threatening presence of the Sultan's Khurasani troops and by other means, discipline was restored.

It was in these moments of crisis and difficulty that the real personality of Sultan Mohamood showed up in all its greatness. Nothing ever dismayed him. However, adverse the circumstances, his confidence in himself remained undisturbed. He was not easily prevailed upon to change his objective.

Without rest, he moved day and night among his forces, encouraging a group here with a joke, another there with sarcastic comments, some with religious exhortation, and others with angry expostulation. Wherever he went, he aroused enthusiasm and instilled confidence.

Only his Hindu troops remained indifferent. They kept asking one another, "What can a human being do when the Sun-god himself decides to join the battle?" Some of them had joined Mohamood in the hope of sharing in the plunder, while others had merely acquiesced to join under the orders of their cowardly Hindu rulers. One and all had now realised that they had joined someone who was going to fight the God himself and not any human power. They began to realise that their duty lay elsewhere. Their dissatisfaction grew. But for the moment, they could only grumble.

The next day when the army chiefs met the Sultan in his tent, each of them had some complaint to make. The elephants were not able to march; the horses were dying for lack of fodder and water; the Hindus had lost heart and the Muslims their enthusiasm; the guides were unable to find the way forward; a Rajput army was awaiting them at a critical point.

The Sultan listened to everyone as he lay stretched out on his couch, resting against cushions. His deep-sunk eyes beneath their bushy brows weighed each man as he described his particular problem. Only Masud was still full of optimism and was able to find an answer for every complaint with an appropriate quotation from the *Koran*.

Just then a sentry came in to announce that two men had come with a message from the Mukhi of Multan. The news affected each man in the tent differently. Some who were optimistic by nature thought that the message could

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only bring hope; those who were already in a despondent mood sighed in apprehension. The Sultan sat up immediately and ordered the men to be brought in. Masud jumped up in high spirits and went out himself to bring in the newcomers.

Within a few minutes, he came back with Samant and Nandidutt. They had arrived there in their search for the shorter desert route to Gujarat. When they saw the big camp, Nandidutt advised Samant that they should make their escape, but Samant ignored his advice with great stubbornness and marched straight to the camp and asked to be admitted into the presence of the Sultan.

The guards became suspicious. They had never known a Hindu traveller wanting to meet the Sultan of his own accord. But when Samant said that he was coming from Jhallor, bringing a message from the Mukhi of Multan, they thought it advisable to consult their superior officer, who in turn asked for orders from his own superior, until at last Samant's request filtered through to the Sultan.

Twenty-one-year-old Samant looked impressive. His eyes displayed firmness and fanaticism; his face, once gentle, was now riddled with unattractive wrinkles. Unhappiness had changed him radically within a few days. Old Nandidutt, having made up his mind not to be parted from Samant, had with equal determination stuck to him as his inseparable companion.

As soon as they came in, everyone was anxious to hear what news they had brought. In a loud voice, the

Sultan asked Masud to invite the two visitors to come right in. The interpreter, Tilak, was ordered to find out where they had come from. Tilak, thereafter, put further questions to which the Sultan desired answers.

"Where have you come from?" was the first question.

"From Jhallor and along the route to Marwar."

"Who sent you?"

"The Mukhi of Multan."

"What message have you brought?"

"I have been told to convey the message only to Hammir." He said this quietly yet firmly.

"Where is the Mukhi?"

"Would you like me to give you the reply in the presence of all these men?"

"Yes. That is the order of the Sultan. May God preserve him."

"The Mukhi has left this world."

"What?" exclaimed more than one Sardar.

The Sultan himself stood up and asked, "Where, and at whose hands?"

"He died along the road from Jhallor some twenty days ago at the hands of Rajput warriors," promptly came the reply.

"How do we know that you are telling the truth?"

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Samant took out from his waist band the diamond-studded dagger and offered it to Masud who was standing near. "If you want proof, here is his dagger."

Masud took the dagger in his hand and came near Tilak. They examined it together. There was no doubt; it was the dagger that the Sultan had given the Mukhi as a present. The Sultan was dumbfounded, and so were the others. They all looked at Samant's quiet and fearless face, and for some time no one spoke.

"Who are you?" enquired Tilak at Sultan's instance.

"I am a Rajput."

"What message did he send?"

"Do you wish me to give you the message now in the midst of all these people?"

"Yes. Yes. Yes," the Sultan answered impatiently. "For the sake of Allah, speak."

Samant looked at the Sultan with steady eyes and then said in a low, aggressive tone, "You had sent the Mukhi to bribe the rulers of Marwar and Jhallor." Everyone was surprised at the impertinence of the young man and waited with bated breath to see how the Sultan would react. Samant was well past the stage of fear or sensitivity, for he was no longer afraid of death.

"So what?"

"Jhallor and Marwar refused to be bribed. Not only

that, but troops of these two kingdoms have joined hands with the rulers of Gujarat and are waiting to give you battle." Samant spoke slowly and clearly. Every word that he spoke was like a sledge-hammer blow to his audience.

The Sultan showed impatience for the first time. He saw fear writ large on the face of everyone around him. He shut his eyes as Samant continued in slow and steady voice, "The dying Mukhi told me to tell you that if you value your life and your reputation, go back as quickly as you can to where you came from."

There was complete and unbroken silence for several minutes. Everyone had become speechless with unnamed fear. Except for Samant, everyone seemed transformed into a statue. It was the Sultan who was the first to pull himself together. He exclaimed, "Oh Allah!"

Samant saw his opportunity, and before anyone could realise what his intention was, he jumped, brushing aside Masud and Tilak, pulled out his dagger, and sought to plunge it into the Sultan's throat. Everyone was electrified.

With his right hand, the wide-awake Sultan seized Samant's right wrist in such a strong grip that the dagger stopped just where it touched his throat. With his left hand, as if he was lifting a small child, he lifted up Samant and twisted his right arm.

Livid with anger, he roared: "It is not easy to kill Mohamood. Allah be praised!" Then he twisted Samant's

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arm still more until the dagger fell out of the young man's hand.

He laughingly raised Samant above his head with both his hands and threw him away like a bundle. In a moment the Sultan established his supremacy. All those around, lost in despondence only a moment earlier, once again regained faith in their leader.

Samant tried to stand up, but a dozen swords stood ready poised to kill him. The Sultan ordered them all to replace their swords in their scabbards. The order was immediately complied with.

Samant stood up. There was no sign of fear on his face. His calmness amazed everybody. Both he and the Sultan looked at each other and there was admiration in the eyes of the Sultan.

"Let no one touch him. God is great. He protects his servants," said the Sultan.

"Your Highness," said Tilak as he struck his forehead, "I have only just realised who this old man is. He is the family priest of Ghogha Rana. I remember now where I had seen him before. I had seen him when I went to Ghoghagadh the first time."

Nandidutt looked up. He had recognised Tilak the moment he had entered the tent. "Ghogha Rana!" exclaimed Masud in surprise. "One of his sons caused the death of several thousands of our men only two days ago."

Samant could not understand the enemy's strange language, though he guessed what the conversation was about because the name Ghogha Rana was frequently mentioned. "Ghogha Bapa!" he exclaimed in a proud voice. "Yes, I am his grandson. You have destroyed my entire clan and now I am the only survivor. You infidel! Use your sword and kill me also so that I may join my ancestors." Those who could understand Samant's language were stupefied at this young man's brave words, his determination and his manly charm. Masud stood with his hand on his sword waiting for the Sultan's command to kill Samant. Tilak translated Samant's remarks.

The Sultan did not owe his position merely to his birth; he was gifted with the great skill of judging the right moment for action, to win over people's hearts and to act generously when generosity was demanded. This was one such occasion. With smiling face and with admiration in his eyes, he came forward. With one hand he mentioned to Masud and Tilak to move away. The other he rested on Samant's shoulders.

Once again everyone watched the scene with wonder. "Tilak, tell him that Ghogha Rana's son and his family have put even Abdul Kasim Mohamood's great reputation in the shade by their bravery. Ghogha Rana, even though I sought his friendship, killed thousands of my men. His son disorganised my entire army only two days ago and today with astonishing courage you all but killed me."

When Tilak conveyed these remarks to Samant, the

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latter eagerly inquired, "Where is Ghogha Rana's son? He is my father." And he who had remained completely composed and immovable was now trembling with emotion.

"Tell him, Tilak," said the Sultan, "tell him what happened. Such a soldier has not been seen ever before. Single-handed he misled us and took us into the desert. Today he is lying dead in the midst of ten thousand corpses of my own soldiers."

"Well done, well done," murmured Nandidutt, as tears of joy fell from his eyes.

"You killed my grandfather, you killed all my relations, you killed my father. When are you going to kill me?" asked Samant coolly.

"Mohamood is brave and appreciates bravery. Go. I am releasing you. But young man, remember, God is on my side."

When he understood what Mohamood had said, the descendant of Ghogha Bapa shouted with anger, "Hammir, so long as the Lord of the three worlds is there waiting to destroy you, what is the use of your bragging?"

The Sultan smiled as he remarked, "Masud, take away this young man and this old man too. Give them camels as good as you can find, give them ten days' food and water. Let them go where they like." Turning towards his officers, he added, "As long as Allah is with me, I am happy to welcome and appreciate such brave enemies."

Then he said to Masud with some severity: "Masud, if anyone dares to harm this man, kill him at once." This was the magnificent gesture of Mohamood, made as if to confirm his invincibility.

Masud went out with Samant and Nandidutt. The Sultan once again turned towards his officers. Not wishing to lose such a fine opportunity, he said affectionately, "My friends, Allah has once again protected my life. It shows that victory will always be ours. Rav Lakhan and his army are chasing us. If this boy was speaking the truth, the armies of Jhallor, Marwar and Gujarat are facing us. I am determined to go forward to destroy the idols of the idol-worshippers and gather their riches. Even if none of you come with me, I will go forward alone. If you like, come with me. If not, you are free to go where you wish. What do you say?"

The last few moments had completely changed the atmosphere. There could be only one answer and they gave it enthusiastically as they touched their Sultan's feet. At this miraculous transformation, a wide grin appeared on the face of the Sultan.

22.

THE WARNING

ARJAN GHADHVI, the keeper of the fort, was fast asleep on his cot in the courtyard. His monotonous and loud snores reassured the residents of the fortress of his presence. It was already past midnight, and the few people—men and women—who lived in the Neelam fort were all asleep.

Neelamgadh stood on the frontier of the territories of the King of Patan. On three sides of it, there was a thick forest, and the wind blowing in from the forest made a sound not very different from that of wailing human beings. For years, this wailing sound of the wind harmonised every night with Arjan Ghadhvi's snores.

Today, to this harmony there was added the beat of hooves. Ghadhvi heard this beat in his sleep, and he got up with a start. How strange! Only a few miles away from the fortress, there was a rest-house, and no one had ever dared to leave its comfort and cross the fearful forest at dead of night. Who could it be and at this speed?

Arjan Ghadhvi sat up and listened attentively. This was

the sound of camels—not one, not two, but three—racing towards the fort, coming closer. Ghadhvi drew his sword and prepared his bow and arrow. Clip-clop, clip-clop, clip-clop was the only sound that struck his ears.

Ghadhvi climbed to the top of the fort to see who was coming from the direction of the desert. In the dim light of the stars, he could not see very clearly, but the sound of approaching camels was becoming clearer and louder.

The old fortress-keeper strained his sharp eyes to pierce the darkness. Though the stars flickered like fireflies, he was able to see three shadowy figures coming closer and closer like ghosts. The fortress-keeper was frightened. He called out to his men to awaken them. By the time the ghostly camels came up to the fort, there were eight men ready to receive them with a hail of arrows, but their hands were trembling.

“Who are you?” asked Arjan.

“I am going to Prabhas Patan on very important work,” came the reply in a deep and grave tone.

“What is your name?”

“I am a Chauhan. Open the gates and give me fresh camels.” The speaker spoke impatiently but in a voice of authority. Ghadhvi immediately ordered the gates to be opened. The first rider dismounted from his camel and came in. Arjan Ghadhvi had not yet fully recovered from his fright: to him the men and their camels seemed like ghosts.

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"Why are you in such a hurry?" he asked tremulously. He had no other question to put. He saw standing in front of him a young man, lean and pale, like one risen from the dead. His sunken eyes shone terrifyingly bright. He heard the ghostly figure say: "Give me three good camels. I wish to ride to Prabhas Patan. I advise you to leave the fort and go away."

"Are you seriously suggesting that I should desert this fort? Have I worn bangles around my wrists? Do you think I am afraid of this Garjan?"

"Ghadhvi," said the young man, "do not be foolish. Do you realise who Hammir of Garjan is? He is like a whirlwind. Within ten days he will arrive here and he will then burn and destroy everything. My advice to you is to run away to the forest as quickly as possible."

"Young man," replied Ghadhvi contemptuously, "we of the older generation are not cowards like you, young men of today."

The young man laughed, but there was harshness and ferocity in his laughter. A chill of fear ran through Arjan Ghadhvi, for he was still not certain if he was talking to a ghost or to a human being!

"Coward? Do you suggest that I am a coward? Have you heard of Ghogha Bapa?"

Arjan Ghadhvi was greatly devoted to Ghogha Bapa. As the guardian of the farthest point of his master's kingdom of the desert, he had spent all his life recounting many a glorious tale of Ghogha Bapa, the ruler of the desert. Years ago, in the

days of the rule of Mulrajdev, he had met Ghogha Bapa personally and so claimed personal relationship with him.

Suddenly Ghadhvi's memory became clear. He had seen Ghogha Bapa fifty years ago as a young man and the man he saw now in front of him was the very image of Ghogha Bapa. Poor Ghadhvi shook with fear. Here was the same forehead, the same eyes, the same moustache. This must be Ghogha Bapa's ghost. "Ghogha Bapa!" he exclaimed folding his hands. "You are Ghogha Bapa."

The young man smiled with a sad, faraway look in his eyes.

"Ghogha Bapa is dead. He died at the hands of Hammir of Garjan, and that terrible man is marching here, destroying everything that comes in his way. His objective is to destroy the temple of Lord Somanath. You will die trying to stop him. Listen to me. Run away now into the jungle and from there harass him. You can do so only if you are still alive."

"But, Bapa, where are you going?"

"To organise the defence of Prabhas of Lord Somanath. Come, hurry up." Ghadhvi still believed that he was talking to Ghogha Bapa's ghost, and he did not have the courage to contradict! He arranged to place fresh camels at the young man's disposal, and immediately afterwards the young man disappeared with his companions in the darkness on the backs of their galloping camels. For a long time, Arjan Ghadhvi stood there trembling in every limb.

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"Father, who is he?" asked Ghadhvi's son.

"My son, it is Ghogha Bapa, who has come back to save Lord Somanath."

"Ghogha Bapa!"

"Yes. Exactly what he looked like fifty years ago."

The boy looked at his father with anxiety. Surely his father had not taken leave of his senses. Arjan could not fail to read the meaning of the expression on his son's face! He said: "Ghogha Bapa has come back from Heaven. Come, let us go. We have been warned by the Lord Somanath Himself."

The news of Hammir's rapid march reached every village along the highway between Marwad and Patan with amazing speed. The Hammir of Garjan, it was said, was about to descend upon them. Many a traveller coming from Marwad told incredible tales of Hammir's army. Some people believed that Hammir would come; many others laughed them out. "Who would dare to attack Lord Somanath?" they contended.

But now there were fresh stories spread by Arjan Ghadhvi's men. Ghogha Bapa, the ruler of the desert, had been killed and his ghost had come personally and warned Arjan Ghadhvi that if he did not leave immediately, he would be destroyed.

Someone claimed that he had heard this story from Ghadhvi's own mouth, when he had met Ghadhvi at a marriage party. In the days of Mulrajdev, Ghadhvi had met

Ghogha Bapa. That was fifty years ago, and this ghost was the very image of Ghogha Bapa as he looked fifty years ago. His eyes were terrifying and his skin scorched and shrivelled. There was a wound on his neck. Ghadhvi had recognised him immediately. Ghogha Bapa was the ruler of the desert. If he was killed, then Hammir could not be far away. He would be in Gujarat in no time. What was to be done?

The headman of the neighbouring village had seen camels flying past his house. Ghogha Bapa was riding the foremost camel. He said in a deep voice: "Take the village people into the forest, for Hammir of Garjan is coming and will leave no one alive. If you have courage, harass him from the rear."

A woman in another village carrying pots of water on her head averred that she had also come across Ghogha Bapa. He asked for water from her. She was frightened, because his eyes were unblinking. The eyes of a dead man would be fixed, wouldn't they? She had emptied her pot, but his thirst was unquenchable. The Hammir had killed him, and a dead person's thirst would be unquenchable. Ghogha Bapa told her: "Mother, tell your fellow-villagers to run away into the jungle. Hammir of Garjan is about to come."

That was the one and only refrain. Rumours began to spread. Some claimed to have seen blood spurting from Ghogha Bapa's chest as if from a fountain. Some had seen sparks of fire flying from his camel's feet. Some others said they had given food to Ghogha Bapa and his companions, but they would not eat. How could a ghost eat? Stories of this

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kind confused people and terrified them so that many ran away into neighbouring jungles taking with them their belongings. Village after village was gripped in fear. The villagers talked only about Ghogha Bapa and his camels. Whenever they saw any movement on the horizon, they imagined that it was the ghost of Ghogha Bapa and his companions on the move. Legends regarding Ghogha Bapa went on multiplying.

In Prabhas Patan, Gang Sarvagna, after completing his prayers at home, was preparing to go to the temple of Lord Somanath to make his daily offering of the sacred *bilwa* leaf. His dignified and impressive face was as usual calm and composed. In one hand he carried the sacred container and in the other he carried the *bilwa* leaf which he had himself picked.

Rumours had begun to get currency even in Prabhas Patan about the great army of Garjan, but the rumours had not yet aroused fear in anyone's heart. There were of course many people including warriors who loved to gossip: that Hammir ruler was killed in Multan; that he had lost his way; that so long as Lord Somanath was there, how dare anybody come into Saurashtra? Besides, was not Bheemdev Solanki there to cut into pieces any invader who dared to venture thus far? So why worry?

Damodar's report had, for a moment, created a sense of anxiety in Sarvagna's mind, but as no definite information had come to him, he felt satisfied that there was no reason for

anxiety. Moreover, one of the rumours had it that Hammir's army had died of thirst in the desert. And this found credence, for could anyone determined to fight God Himself, meet with any other fate?

Sarvagna was determined to maintain the normal peaceful atmosphere and regular routine in the temple and its surroundings. Whatever had happened when the world was created would disappear when the time came for its final disappearance. The peace and the power of such eternal values were not likely to be affected by a momentary invasion of an alien.

Prayers were taking place as usual at all appointed times. The dancing girls were performing their dances, and the *aarti* was being offered as usual. The devotees came to pray, the sun rose and set, and the flag over the temple of Somanath flew proudly.

Gang Sarvagna, about to leave for the temple, put on his wooden sandals. Before, however, he had taken a step outside his residence, a disciple entered, saying "Gurudev, there is a stranger"

Before Gang Sarvagna could, give his permission, the visitor rushed in—pale as a ghost but with eyes fiercely steady. He fell at Gang Sarvagna's feet. He was out of breath and could only whisper: "Praise be to Lord Shiva!"

23.

GURUDEV'S RESOLVE

"LORD SHIVA be praised," blessed Sarvagna. "Get up, my son. Who are you?"

The visitor stood up. His forehead was covered with innumerable wrinkles. "Gurudev, do you not recognise me?" There were tears in his voice.

Sarvagna recognised the visitor. He gave his tray, prepared for offering worship, into the hands of a disciple, and exclaimed: "You are Sajjan Chauhan's son? What brings you here?"

"Gurudev, I am indeed Sajjan Chauhan's son!" replied Samant with trembling lips, trying to suppress a sob.

Gang Sarvagna put his hand affectionately on the boy's shoulders and took him inside his room, asking his disciple not to let anyone else come in. He made Samant sit down, and himself sat in front of him. "My boy, where is Sajjan Chauhan? Where is Ghogha Rana? Why have you come back?" He asked all these questions eagerly.

"Gurudev," Samant began in a broken voice, but before he could say anything more, tears streamed from his eyes. "You had said that as long as even one son of Ghogha Rana's family was alive, let him destroy the enemy. Gurudev, except for me, they have all kept their promise." As he said this, Samant again burst into sobs.

"How?" asked Gang Sarvagna whose anxiety had increased.

"Ghogha Bapa and all his family were killed in battle at Ghoghagadh. All heroic women entered fire in *jauhar*."

Once again Samant was speechless with grief. Then he resumed, "My father died after tricking to death ten thousand of Hammir's men in the desert." Samant's voice choked with sobs.

Gang Sarvagna embraced him warmly. "My son, do not cry. Those who die carrying out God's commands, will find happiness in the next world."

After a while, Samant said: "I myself went into Hammir of Garjan's camp in order to kill him. I made an attempt, but I was seized. I was not able to carry out Lord Somanath's behest. I am the only unfortunate man in all my family. I was let off alive by the Hammir."

"My son, so long as Lord Somanath wishes to protect you, no one dares to kill you. Be composed. Control yourself. Do not be in a hurry to tell me the entire story. Come, drink this cup of water."

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With a great effort Samant controlled his tears and then narrated all that had happened since he left Prabhas Patan with his father. As the story developed, Gang Sarvagna was deeply moved and he frequently interjected, "I bow to Thee, Lord Shiva!" At last he asked: "How far do you think will Hammir of Garjan have reached?"

"Gurudev, I think, he should be in the vicinity of Abu within five to seven days; he may take a few days more."

"Bheemdev Solanki is waiting for him in Patan. It would not be easy to get past him," remarked Sarvagna wishfully.

"Gurudev, I think it would be unwise to rely on that."

"Why do you say so?"

"Gurudev, few people have any idea of Hammir and his strength. He may be a devil, but he has great capacity for making people do what he wills. He is extremely proficient in the art of war, and his army is far larger than any this part of the world has ever seen. Patan would be razed to the ground in no time whatever."

"Young man, have you no faith in the benevolence of God with the destructive bow, Pinak, in his hand?"

"Of course, I have," replied Samant. "But I do not have any faith in the intelligence of our brave men. When we first heard of Hammir's invasion, all of us said: 'We shall finish him off in no time!' That is what Wakpatiraj said. That was also the view of Ghogha Bapa, and he has been destroyed. So also thought Chauhan Balamdev and he has

also been destroyed. I have moved among Hammir's men, I have talked to him, I have seen his physical strength and have an idea of his capacity for leading men. He is a very great military leader."

"Well then, Lord Shankar will deal with him."

"Yes. Lord Shankar may cope with him, but not through the instrumentality of Bheemdev."

"What do you suggest?"

"I advised everybody all along the route I came: 'Make way for Hammir if you wish to save yourself. And then harass his men from behind.' My advice to you and Bheemdev is the same. Let him bypass Patan and come into Saurashtra. Then destroy him when his army, tired with the march, walks in the trap. There is no other way."

"But if he comes here, what do we do?" asked Sarvagna.

"That is why I have come post-haste to tell you. You must leave Prabhas as soon as possible. Let Hammir enter a deserted Prabhas."

For a little while Gang Sarvagna closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "My son, so your advice is that since we cannot fight Hammir face to face, we shall let him come, then surround and destroy him."

"Yes. That is exactly what I mean."

"So I should evacuate Prabhas and take Lord Somanath to some other place and hide Him?"

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"There is no other course."

"And I should commit the sin of removing from its place the great *Linga* which manifested itself when the world was created, which is pure and beautiful, which has passed through innumerable tests of fire, which the elements can neither reduce nor increase, and which shines with the brilliance of a thousand flames against the background of the stormy ocean?" Gang Sarvagna spoke as if he was reciting the *Shivapurana*. Samant could only stare at him, for he was incapable of following Gang's line of thought.

"—And I who am the representative of the divine Lakulesh, the incarnation of Shankar, I who have acquired so much knowledge and learning through the grace of Lord Somanath, am I now myself to remove Him and run away from this temple in order to serve Him?"

"Gurudev," but before Samant could complete his sentence, Sarvagna lifted a finger and silenced him. For a while again he closed his eyes and sat silent, while Samant looked at him speechlessly. When he opened his eyes again they were shining with a mysterious unearthly brightness. "My son, this Jyotirlinga of Lord Somanath must not be lifted at any cost, and where the *Linga* is, there I shall remain. Let the Hammir do what he likes."

Samant trembled as he listened, for he could only see in his mind's eye the spectacle of the *Linga* being shattered into little pieces. But his pessimism for the future began to

give way before the inflexible decision of this saintly person. All the same, he thought he must protest.

Gang, however, would not let him, and continued: "There is no room for doubt or for further argument. If no mother's son stands between the Lord and the Unbeliever, then I alone, this old Brahmin, will do so. Let us see then what happens. Who will face the great power of Pinakpani? Who knows this feeble old man maybe destined to resist the invader in the great tradition of the *munis* of yore?"

What could Samant say to this incredible determination? But as a soldier, he said: "At least send for Bheemdev's troops. They can fight better here than in Patan, where they will be destroyed in no time whatever."

"Not for me to interfere in battle plans, but I shall give you a letter which you should take to Patan tomorrow morning. Consult Bheemdev and Damodar Mehta and see what they have to say."

"Certainly. I shall rest here tonight and leave early in the morning."

"Very well, but see me before you go. I shall take my bath again and then offer worship to Lord Somanath."

Samant had seen much pain, suffering and destruction in the last four months. He had seen his elders, men and women, brothers and sisters, die, burnt or eaten up by vultures. He had learnt how his beloved father had embraced death of a kind for which even gods would be envious. He

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was the sole survivor of the proud family of Ghogha Bapa. He had no home, no relations and nowhere to seek shelter. He lived now only to carry out the behest of Lord Somanath. His only aim in life now was to destroy the enemy. How else to explain that his life had been spared, while all else had been dead?

Such were his thoughts as he left Sarvagna's presence. His own faith had derived immense strength from Gang's self-confidence and determination. Who could be sure of what might or might not happen between Abu and Prabhas? Who could say that the vision of the powerful Sarvagna, who knew the past and could read the future, was wrong?

As Samant turned towards the temple, a new element entered his thoughts. It was only in the temple of Lord Somanath that he had found everything that he had believed in: his deity, Gurudev, his father, and the dancing girl, who had applied the sacrificial ashes to his and his father's forehead and had wished farewell with a smile and with the words, "Come back victorious."

Those words he had kept repeating to himself day after day, when he set out to kill Hammir. It might as well be that he might not be destined to enter Lord Somanath's temple again. If fate had brought him thus far, why should he let go the opportunity of tasting such joy as a brief moment could bring him?

He slowly entered the temple, looking watchfully around him. He was sure that somewhere in those surroundings he

would see that beautiful face, with its attractive smile and ineffable charm; but his hopes were not to be realised. With heavy heart he bowed before Lord Somanath. As he offered his prayers, there were tears in his eyes. The hardships that he had endured for so many days made themselves felt today.

After telling Sarvagna all that had happened, he felt he had lost something of his great courage. His mind went back to the barren land in which he had wandered a few days earlier, alone, helpless, and without any idea of what he should do. He was now unable to take even a single step further.

He sat down in a corner of the great hall, and resting his head upon his knees, began to weep unreservedly.

His memory brought back to him one after the other his beloved relations; his grandfather, Ghogha Bapa, and his legendary dignity; his father who single-handed had offered such immense resistance to the Hammir; his mother, bright as a goddess, who died on her husband's funeral pyre; his four-year-old sister, delicate as the stem of the flower, whose half-burnt foot he had recognised. How terrible was destiny that he would have to see such terrible sights! His eyes continued to shed hot tears, and sobs shook his frame. He lost count of time.

He woke up only on hearing the sweet voice of a woman. It was a dancing girl of about twenty-five years who was standing in front of him, her eyes full of sympathy.

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"Valorous hero," she said, "why do you weep? Whatever Lord Shankar does, he does for our good."

Samant received a shock on seeing her face. She was a dancing girl just as the other one was; but this one was different. In her eyes there was passion, whereas in the eyes of the other girl there was the innocence of a little child. "Brave man, weeping solves nothing. Come with me. I shall make you smile," she said, her eyes dancing mischievously.

"You think you can make me smile, my dear sister. There is no one on this earth who can stop my tears flowing."

"You are making a mistake." The dancer made one more effort to win Samant with her attractive eyes. "If Tripurasundari is kind to you, you will find it difficult to weep. Get up and come with me."

"Where do you want me to come?" asked Samant as he stood up. True, Sarvagna's men were waiting for him, but he was anxious somehow to reduce the great burden on his heart. The dancer bent low and said softly: "Today is the festival of Tripurasundari. Come. I have no one else with me. You will be able to wash away all your sins."

"Tripurasundari's festival!" murmured Samant uncomprehending. He had learnt that in a well-protected corner of the temple, Lord Shankar's wife was being worshipped as a powerful goddess, and her festival was celebrated according to strange rites. No one seemed to know what those rites were. Today he had no desire to

know what they were. "How can I come?" he asked. "I am not fit for worship."

"Of course, you are. Last night the great goddess came to me in my dream and "

"What?"

"The Goddess Tripurasundari said to me that you are her real devotee."

"I!" exclaimed Samant with surprise.

"Yes. The Goddess, the Spouse of the Lord, said: 'A warrior would be sitting weeping in the hall of the Lord's temple. Bring him. He would preserve my shrine and my Lord's.'"

"Are you telling me the truth?"

"Yes. And I have been commanded to take you to Her."

Could she be telling the truth? Did Parvati, the purest Spouse of the Lord, really think that he would protect her shrine? Would Hammir of Garjan be in the end killed by him? Full of sorrow as he was, his heart again began to throb with enthusiasm as he thought that he was to be the saviour of this magnificent temple!

"Who are you?"

"I am Kundla Devadasi. Come with me."

24.

THE TEMPLE OF TRIPURASUNDARI

SAMANT got up and followed the dancer. Slowly he regained his composure. His eyes took in her physical charm. How different was she from that other tiny dancing girl, who was the personification of grace and purity and devotion to God Shankar! This woman was a *devadasi* given to earthly pleasures.

After his talk with Gang, Samant had been filled with hope. The very idea that he might be the instrument of protecting the shrine of Lord Somanath had aroused his spirit. Was this dancing girl telling the truth or had she made up the story? No. No. Why was he alone kept alive out of the large family of Ghogha Bapa?

He followed her. She led him through a side door into the courtyard where the dancers lived. The sight of these unfamiliar surroundings made Samant forget for a moment his sorrow and his feelings of frustration. After all he was going to the mysterious temple of Goddess Tripurasundari at the invitation of Parvati, the mighty Spouse of the Lord of the world.

Kundla knocked at a small door which was opened after a while. "Who are you?"

"I am Kundla."

"Did you find that man?" the voice enquired in a half-sleepy voice.

"Yes."

"Bring him in."

The door was opened a little more, and Kundla and Samant entered the room, where three *sadhus* covered with ashes, were sitting. Their eyelids were painted red and they were repeating some monstrous indistinct *mantras*.

The *sadhu* who had opened the door, took a burning torch from its socket on the wall and held it in front of Samant. He asked: "What are you?"

"I am Chauhan."

"Are you a devotee of Goddess Mahashakti?"

"I am the devotee of both Lord Somanath and His august spouse, Goddess Parvati."

"He is the one whom I saw in my dream," interjected Kundla.

"Have you the necessary courage?" asked another *sadhu*.

"Courage to do what?"

"Courage to take the oath to serve Goddess Shakti."

Samant looked around. Kundla had left him and was

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busy taking off her clothes. In the light of the torch he was able to see that at the other end of the room shadowy figures were moving backwards and forwards, but it was evident that they were bodies of human beings.

Samant recalled to mind the stories he had heard of those who undertook to serve Tripurasundari by orgiastic rites. Was he about to be initiated into those terrible rites of the cult of Shakti? While his duty lay in riding fast to Patan to give battle to the iconoclast Hammir, why was he brought to this temple with its fearful rites?

"Speak up, man, have you got courage?" asked the *sadhu* again.

"Courage? I have no courage."

The three *sadhus* suddenly rushed towards him. "What did you say?"

"I am not fit to be initiated into the rites of Tripurasundari."

"Then why did you come here, you sinner, you miserable wretch?" exclaimed one of the *sadhus* seizing Samant by his throat. "The great goddess will be angry."

"I have not come on my own. I was brought here by that Kundla. I have no desire to remain here. I am going."

"How dare you go now?" exclaimed another, as he seized his hand. "You want to escape after desecrating the temple of Mahamaya!"

"Let me go," said Samant, as he made vain efforts to

free himself from the *sadhu's* grasp. Seeing this, the third *sadhu* rushed towards him and caught hold of his other hand. "Let you go? Bah!" They shouted and laughed loudly.

"Let me go. Kundla, why did you bring me here?" he turned to her. Kundla shouted angrily. "You beast, how was I to know that my dream would prove untrue? I was certain that Goddess Shakti would be pleased with me. But you have turned out to be an impostor. Now I don't care what happens to you."

"No one has ever been allowed to leave Mahamaya's temple after desecrating it."

The *sadhus* tied Samant to a pillar. He gave up all efforts to escape. He had no further interest in life.

"Will you then do me a favour?" he pleaded. "Let someone go and tell Gurudev Sarvagna that he should not wait for me." The *sadhus* were startled. "Sarvagna!" they exclaimed.

"Yes. He is waiting for me."

One of the *sadhus* looked at Samant attentively as if he had understood everything. "Then let him go on waiting," he threatened in a fearful tone. He picked up a trident from the ground and pointed it at Samant's throat.

Samant knew that the end had come. He had also no desire to live. He shut his eyes and concentrated his thoughts on Ghogha Bapa and Lord Somanath. In a few moments, he imagined he would meet his grandfather, his father and his mother in the other world.

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Suddenly he heard Kundla scream out in fear. "No, No, today not a drop of human blood must fall here." The *sadhu* who was about to kill Samant, was startled and stepped back. He suddenly realised that the world would be destroyed if, on the occasion of the orgiastic festival, there were to flow human blood in the temple of Goddess Mahashakti.

"Sarvagna has sent him here," whispered the *sadhu* grinding his teeth.

"Shall I persuade him?"

"No. Your dream was false."

"Why not ask Rashiji what should be done?"

The three *sadhus* talked softly among themselves and then two of them and Kundla went into another room. Samant's curiosity was aroused, half-dead though he was. He wondered what was happening in the room into which Kundla and the two *sadhus* had retired. What kind of rites would they be practising in the temple of Tripurasundari—obscene, terrible, or awe-inspiring? The fools did not seem to realise that the dreadful Hammir, a demon more terrible than the God of Death, was on the way to Somanath, and coming closer every moment, and was prepared to kill the only man who knew how to checkmate the invader. They were unwittingly pushing the whole world into the jaws of destruction.

Kundla felt angry and frustrated. Among the dancing girls, she was the most attractive and ambitious. She had

every hope of some day holding the top position in this temple as the favourite of a new Gurudev. She had dreamt dreams of Goddess Mahashakti entering her body during the festival which was held every three months, and of being worshipped as a living Tripurasundari. For the last one year, the goddess had not manifested Herself through her. Last night for the first time the goddess had come in her dream; she had found a man at the precise spot indicated in the dream—and yet, at the last moment something had gone wrong.

Her second great desire was to win over Shivarashi. As the foremost disciple of Sarvagna, one day he would succeed him as Gurudev, and if only he would take a liking for her, her status would improve. It was not difficult to attract Shivarashi's attention, but it was almost impossible to win him as her own. It was true, Shivarashi did not have complete control over his senses, and unfortunately he had fallen in love with Chaula. Kundla, however, had still one ray of hope. If, on a festival occasion, Goddess Mahashakti would appear through her, Shivarashi would surely offer worship to her, and his mind would then be diverted from Chaula towards herself.

The festival of Tripurasundari was no ordinary festival. The goddess manifested herself in the person of some living woman and, through her, she would receive worship according to the *shastraic* rites. As the time for the festival drew near, Kundla had grown more and more impatient. It

was undeniable that her dream had proved false and the Rajput had polluted the temple by his presence, but it was equally true that she felt no faintness, no delirious exaltation as she would have if she was possessed by Goddess Mahashakti. Would this occasion too slip through her fingers? She had drunk wine freely; but even that had failed to have any influence on her. She was all but convinced that everything was over.

She had barely moved into the inner shrine, when there was a knock at the door through which she had brought in Samant. She turned round to find that Shivarashi and Siddeshwar were coming to the room. How long should she go on relying upon Goddess Mahamaya? She was Mahamaya herself. She let out a scream and pretending to feel giddy, she pressed her head with her hands and, before the *sadhus* could stretch out their hands to support her, she slid down to the ground unconscious.

The *sadhus*, thinking that the goddess had taken possession of Kundla, proceeded to approach her with triumphant cries.

Shivarashi stamped his foot in anger. For the first time in his life he found it difficult to respect his Gurudev. What Gurudev had done that day, he felt, was unforgivable. Gang Sarvagna, who was the head of the Pashupat cult of Lakulesh and was renowned for his great learning and holiness, had himself destroyed the sacred injunctions that day. Goddess

Tripurasundari had manifested Herself through the person of Chaula that very morning. Chaula was in every way fit to be worshipped as the goddess during this festival, yet Gang Sarvagna had ordered that she was not to be so worshipped!

Chaula was young and inexperienced. She was always terrified of the gruesome rites with which Tripurasundari was worshipped. Her mother Ganga had resisted every attempt to bring her into this temple, pleading Chaula's youth and unfitness to take part in the ceremonies. Now that the girl had acquired the right to dance before Lord Somanath, she could no longer be regarded a child.

Today, moreover, the great Goddess herself had manifested through her body, a privilege for which every temple dancer would have willingly given her life! Since the morning she had lost control over herself and had been behaving as if she was the spouse of Lord Shankar. There was no doubt about her fitness, and Shivarashi was keen she should be worshipped as Goddess Tripurasundari.

Shivarashi could not fathom Chaula's present behaviour. Ever since the day she had danced before Lord Somanath, she had changed completely. Whenever he had met her, he had found her engrossed in thought, as if she was not in this world. Her eyes seemed to be searching for something far away. Her voice and action expressed a total detachment from the world.

Shivarashi found it difficult to keep up his normal

relations with her; and the more unattainable she became, the more attracted he was to her.

Ganga too was unable to understand her daughter. She would have liked that Chaula should offer herself to Shivarashi, but she also realised that, it would be impossible to get the girl to do anything she did not want. Her outlook on life was free from sensual desire. She was just wrapped up in her devotion to Lord Somanath.

For the last two days Shivarashi had been fondly hoping that when Chaula was worshipped as the august Spouse, the wall that she had erected between herself and the world would fall down; this hope, however, was now shattered by Gurudev's firm decision not to let Chaula be worshipped in spite of the tradition of centuries.

Shivarashi was a learned and religious man, and deeply devoted to his *guru*, but he could not forgive his deviation from the religious tradition. The fanatic in him was roused; his frustrated passion added fuel to fire.

When he came into the temple, his mind was still under the influence of this mood. What right had his *guru* to interfere with the age-old practice of worshipping the goddess? He was the protector of religion; what right had he to destroy it? Should he, Shivarashi, allow himself to be blinded by his *guru's* position and sit silent without protest? Were the great *shastras* false, and Sarvagna right? As the

presiding priest of the ceremonies, had he not also a duty to perform?

When the *sadhus* saw Shivarashi, they brought the unconscious Kundla back. "*Acharya!*" exclaimed one of the *sadhus*, "Goddess Mahamaya has entered the body of Kundla."

Shivarashi roared like an angry tiger. "Put her down. She is only pretending. The goddess has entered Chaula."

Taken aback, the *sadhus* promptly put Kundla down, on the ground. Shivarashi wanted to vent his anger on someone. He shook Kundla with his foot and ordered, "Get up, you liar. If you do not, I shall kick every tooth out of your mouth."

Afraid that Shivarashi would put his threat into action, Kundla opened her eyes and said: "Victory to the Mother of the World."

"Did I not say that she was pretending? It is Chaula in whose person the Mother of the World has entered," said Shivarashi. The *sadhu* immediately left Kundla to her own devices and walked towards Rashi. Kundla realised that her last effort had failed. She sat up and looked around herself in a bewildered manner. Even the tied-up Samant could not resist enjoying her discomfiture.

25.

CHAULA SEEKS HER LORD

JUST at this moment, about a dozen more *sadhus*, almost naked, came in. Their eyes were red and their faces angry. "Venerable Rashiji," proclaimed one of the old men, "what is this? How can you think of stopping prayers and worship that have traditionally been offered to Goddess Mahamaya? Do you want to invite the destruction of this world?"

While the *sadhus* were shouting in this manner, Samant saw a number of figures moving about on the other side of the door. What a drama was being enacted in front of his eyes! He thought he was dreaming.

Meanwhile, Shivarashi was getting furious. "This is exactly what I have been saying. This Kundla is a fake. Goddess Mahashakti has not entered into her but into Chaula—but Gurudev has forbidden worship of her!"

For a little while there was silence, everyone trying to understand the full meaning of Shivarashi's words. The oldest among the *sadhus* stepped forward, his eyes burning with

anger, and exclaimed: "Who dares to keep Goddess Tripurasundari unworshipped today? No one is worthy of being a *guru* who does not comply with the rites."

"You are right," confirmed Siddeshwar, meaningfully. He looked at Shivarashi and could easily see the great conflict that was going on in his mind: 'What would he choose, loyalty to the *guru* or loyalty to holy tradition and sacred injunctions or love for Chaula?'

The old man folded his hands and said to him: "Rashiji, if you do not observe the rites, who else will? I cannot bear to see the defilement of practices followed since time immemorial."

"Mahamaya Tripurasundari must be worshipped," interjected Siddeshwar softly. He had decided that this was the time to overthrow Sarvagna and enthrone Shivarashi in the place of authority. It was, therefore, expedient to win the favour of these *sadhus*.

Shivarashi at last made up his mind. "Goddess Mahashakti can never be left unworshipped. Siddeshwar, come with me. We will ourselves fetch Chaula." He and Siddeshwar then left immediately to fetch Chaula. "Victory to the Goddess," shouted the *sadhus* joyfully.

When he saw Shivarashi and Siddeshwar leave, Samant was affected in a strange way. His whole body trembled with anticipation to behold Chaula once again. He wanted to free himself, but neither by strength nor by artifice, could

he untie his bonds. With bated breath, he stared fixedly at the door through which she was likely to enter. He had seen with his own eyes his family being destroyed, and if now any reason had been left for him to live, that reason was Chaula, his dream goddess—and he was destined to see her defiled. His head drooped with dejection.

Chaula was only partially conscious. Her eyes were full of sleep, her face betrayed anxiety. Her half-closed rosy lips kept muttering: "My Lord Shambhu, my Lord." Of late she frequently fell into such half-conscious state when she imagined she was Lord Shankar's consort Parvati and resided with him on Mount Kailas.

Ganga, her mother, was sitting by Chaula's side, anxiety writ large upon her face. At first she had thought that Chaula had become insane, but Sarvagna had assured her that there was no sign of insanity. She was in a trance induced by absolute surrender to the Lord.

Ganga was startled by the sudden arrival of Shivarashi and Siddeshwar. They appeared to be in great hurry and excitement.

"Why, what has happened?" Ganga asked, frightened. Before Shivarashi could reply, the deep and loud call of a conch was heard from a distance. As soon as she heard it, Chaula sat up, looking all around herself: "Mother," she exclaimed, "my Lord is calling me. Take me to Him. My Lord, I am coming. Here I come."

Shivarashi smiled. He was convinced that Goddess Mahamaya had in truth manifested herself in Chaula. The opportunity which he had been looking for had at long last arrived.

"Chaula, yes. Lord Somanath is calling you, and I have come to take you to Him," he said.

Chaula stood up in haste and came close to him with the eagerness of a devotee. "Rashiji, are you telling the truth? Lead me to Him. Show me my Lord, my beloved Lord Shambhu." Her half-closed lips were indicative of her great eagerness to meet her Lord. Shivarashi put his hand on Chaula's shoulders and began to guide her towards the door.

Ganga intervened: "Rashiji, what are you doing? Where are you taking Chaula?"

"Siddeshwar, keep Ganga here," ordered Shivarashi. "There is no need for her to be in the temple." Siddeshwar pushed Ganga into her house and bolted the door from outside.

Samant was astonished when he saw Chaula walk in from the secret door of the temple. He had expected to witness a struggling Chaula brought in forcibly by Shivarashi; instead, what he saw was a young girl coming with all the eagerness and joy of a maiden in love. There was eagerness in her eyes, the breath from her scarcely closed lips betrayed impatience, and she walked with quick steps. She came in

lightly like a doe on her feet; small and delicate, she was swaying gently like a lotus in a pond. Her face was suffused with love. She looked a thousand times more beautiful and attractive than when Samant had first seen her. Before the sight of such heavenly beauty, he forgot, for a moment, where he was as well as the serious situation in which he himself was placed.

Looking in every direction, Chaula asked: "Is my Lord Shambhu here in this temple?" Her eyes were shining, but unseeing, unable to identify things around her.

"Yes. He is waiting for you here," answered Shivarashi.

The *sadhus* standing by the walls of the temple with torches in their hands, dropped their eyes when they saw Tripurasundari arrive in person, and began to recite the appropriate *mantras*. She entered the door of the inner shrine and disappeared within like a streak of beautiful light. Shivarashi and the *sadhus* followed her. For a moment, the sight of such devotion to Lord Shiva had even cleansed them of their passion.

As she entered the inner sanctum quickly with impatient steps, she failed to notice the men and women who were eagerly standing, waiting in half-darkness to worship her. She was not dressed in the sacramental clothes, nor was she anointed for the proper worship of Mahamaya. She had not drunk the sacred wine purified by the incantation of proper *mantras*. No one remembered to tell her that she

had to be prepared for the worship. All that they saw was the powerful Tripurasundari rushing in anxiously to meet her Lord Shankar under the impulse of her great love for Him. The old priest of the temple who for years had seen Tripurasundari manifest herself in different women once every three months, had never before undergone an experience such as this. Today he too was overwhelmed. He was unable to greet her with anything more than "Victory to Mahamaya."

Shivarashi alone was prepared to take full advantage of this situation. Ganga had been worshipping Sarvagna as if he was Lord Shankar. Why should not Chaula worship him (Shivarashi) in the same way? He went past Chaula and stood at the door of the inner shrine of Tripurasundari. Consciously or unconsciously, he picked up a trident and waved it in his hand. Chaula rushed in and with an impatient glance, saw Shivarashi standing in front of her.

"Shivarashi, where is my Lord?"

"Here is He," said Shivarashi opening out his arms indicating that he represented Lord Shambhu. But Chaula's mind failed to grasp his meaning. She brushed Shivarashi aside and ran into the inner shrine calling out: "My Lord, here I am, here I am, here I am." She embraced Shankar's *linga* in the temple and began to address it in fond words. The waiting men and women reverentially witnessed this wonderful display of spiritual love through the door of the shrine.

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Immediately afterwards Chaula became unconscious and only then did the devotees realise that Chaula had touched the sacred *linga* without undergoing the proper rituals. She had not offered worship to the image of Goddess Mahamaya; all the other rites had been ignored, which were the core of the worship of Tripurasundari. By her simple but genuine devotion, Chaula had succeeded in bringing all these lovers of the obscene to the high level of pure spiritual love, but for a moment. The magic of pure devotion was dispelled: they looked at one another, horror-struck at this new ritual.

Shivarashi had failed in his objective, despite his disobedience of his *guru*. He did not know now what he should do. The *sadhus*, however, complained that the rites must be completed. The temple of Mahamaya could not be allowed to be desecrated.

Kundla's voice too was heard, protesting that the Goddess of the World could not descend in this way; that Chaula was either pretence or madness. Someone suggested that the unconscious Chaula should be carried out and dressed and prepared so that the worship of Mahamaya could be completed appropriately. Many tongues wagged, for the ardent devotees had looked forward to the sexy ritual with impatience.

26.

SARVAGNA INTERVENES

GANG SARVAGNA sat down to meditate, but he was unable to dissociate his mind as usual from his surroundings. He found it difficult to control his mind and his thoughts. The thought of Hammir's impending attack kept worrying him. He also felt as if wailing Chaula was calling out to him that she was being violated, that she who was completely devoted to Lord Shiva, was being subjected to inhuman torture.

Sarvagna could not concentrate as usual. He gave up his attempt to meditate and stood up. He looked all round himself as if to sense the source of the trouble, like a trapped deer looking for its hunter.

He then went straight towards the residence of the dancers. One or two disciples who were standing nearby, were astonished to see Gurudev himself go past the temple at such a speed, but that aroused no curiosity in their faithful hearts.

Sarvagna went to Ganga's house. On seeing her door

bolted from the outside, he was about to turn back when he heard the sound of Ganga crying inside. He immediately unbolted the door and entered the house. He found Ganga weeping bitterly with her face buried in her hands.

“What is the matter, Ganga, why are you weeping?”

“Gurudev,” sobbed Ganga, “Rashiji has just taken that mad girl into the temple of Tripurasundari. What will happen to my darling little girl?”

Gang Sarvagna lost his usual composure for a moment. The penance he had practised for years had purified his mind and removed from it everything that was impure. When quite young he had been convinced that in the various rituals of Tripurasundari, there was an element of lewdness and violence. For years he had tried to purify these rites. No one was to be made a *sadhu* or a *sadhvi* without his or her full consent. No one other than himself or Shivarashi was to be incharge of the celebration of the festival. These rules he had enforced rigorously.

However, for some years he had ceased to officiate at this festival. He had left it to Shivarashi to attend to it, but had left him in no doubt about what he was up against! So long as the old priests lived and so long as those who believed in the traditional rites continued to be part of the worship at the temple, he was not able to close it down.

Sarvagna had been fully convinced that there was need for reform in many of the rituals of the Lakulesh branch of

the Shaivite cult and he had been making every effort to bring them about as speedily as possible. These efforts were not liked by the more ignorant of his disciples and by the ordinary worshippers and devotees. This he knew. And when he found that even Shivarashi was not particularly enthusiastic in supporting his efforts, he had felt disappointed.

In regard to Chaula, he had decided firmly that that innocent girl was not to be initiated in those rites and had taken care to inform both Ganga and Shivarashi of his decision. He knew that his principal disciple was not in agreement with him on this point and when that very day Shivarashi had come to inform him that Mahamaya had manifested Herself in Chaula, Sarvagna had told him in clear terms that Chaula was not to be taken to the festival.

Sarvagna had observed in Rashi's face signs of sensual passion. He had noted with sadness this failing of Shivarashi, but had failed to take appropriate precautionary steps. Now when he heard Ganga's account, he became angry. He soon regained control over himself, and decided that the time had come for enforcing his decision.

"Come with me, Ganga," he said, "take that torch with you."

When they arrived at the secret door of the temple, the *sadhu* who was guarding it, was terrified. "Gurudev!" he exclaimed involuntarily.

"Yes. You stay here," ordered Sarvagna.

Ganga went ahead with the torch. In its dim light Sarvagna saw Samant tied to a pillar. "Samant, you here!" he asked in surprise.

"Gurudev, I was decoyed here to worship Tripurasundari," replied Samant with a harsh laugh. "I refused, and so they tied me up. One of the *sadhus* has decided to kill me and I am awaiting his return!"

"He, on whom depends the whole defence of Prabhas today, was to be killed here so that destruction should come early!" exclaimed Gang Sarvagna. He ordered the *sadhu* standing nearby, "Release this man."

The *sadhu* obediently untied Samant.

"Have you seen Chaula?"

"Yes. Only a little while ago she came in with Rashiji and went inside."

"On her own?" enquired Sarvagna.

"Yes. She went in in high spirits, laughing and running!"

"That is correct," confirmed Ganga. "When Shivarashi told her that Lord Shambhu was waiting for her, she just ran. Today she has lost herself completely in her devotion to Lord Shankar."

"She went of her own free-will?" repeated Gurudev. If she had gone in of her own free-will, what objection could he take, was the doubt worrying him.

"Oh, no, not in that sense. She would never accept these rites willingly," said Ganga.

"But these are amazing people," interjected Samant. As he said this, he thought of the vicious Kundla and was unable to keep out of his voice the disgust he felt.

Sarvagna proceeded towards the temple, followed by Samant and Ganga. When they saw the open courtyard in front of the Tripurasundari temple, the sight that met their eyes horrified Samant. In the light of a single torch, a number of men and women were singing songs in praise of the goddess and as they went round and round in a circle and kept time, clapping their hands, it was difficult to say whether these were human beings or were monstrous shadows.

Not even when he saw vultures moving in upon the corpses of his own relations had Samant felt as revolting as now at the sight that met his eyes.

The crowd was moving in a circle round three or four men, one of whom was holding a torch. Suddenly a terrified scream was heard above the sound of singing, followed by another and yet another. Sarvagna and Ganga recognised at once who had screamed, samant guessed where it was.

Sarvagna ran towards the place whence the scream had come, Ganga following, trembling in all her limbs.

Samant's patience was exhausted. Drawing his sword from its scabbard, he fell upon the whole crowd. Terrified at the sudden appearance of what looked like a death-

dealing monster, the crowd gave way, revealing the trio,—Chaula, the old priest who was holding the torch and a large strong woman holding the struggling Chaula firmly in her grip. Evidently, Chaula had only just come to her normal senses and was horrified at what she saw going on around herself. Shivarashi was offering worship to her as the goddess incarnate.

Samant thrust aside the woman and stepped near Chaula.

“What is this, Rashiji?” Sarvagna demanded. Rashi was terrified. On one side he saw Samant with his drawn sword, and on the other Gurudev, scolding him silently with his eyes. His hands shook so much that the oblation-laden tray slipped from his hands and fell with a clatter on the ground. “Gurudev! Gurudev! Gurudev!” shouted the frightened men and women from all sides.

“Rashi!” exclaimed Sarvagna with deep sadness. “By bringing Chaula against her wish, you have disregarded the most important principle governing this ceremony.”

“No, that is not so. She came here of her own free-will,” interjected Siddeshwar coming to Rashi’s assistance with great courage.

“That would explain, wouldn’t it, why she was screaming loud? Siddeshwar, you are a disgrace to the cult of Lakulesh. Rashi, go now. I shall prescribe the proper penance for you tomorrow.”

"No sir, no. Chaula came here of her own free-will," repeated Rashi.

"Yes, that is true," supported the old priest. Two or three *sadhus* came up and stood next to the priest. Opposition to Sarvagna was writ large on their faces. The *sadhus* held in their hands large iron pincers, and their object appeared to be to frighten Sarvagna.

Calmly and with complete composure, Sarvagna looked at all of them with a sad face. "You have all combined to desecrate this temple. If you have eyes, you will see with what shame and fear Chaula is looking at you. This is the temple of Goddess Mahamaya. It is not a temple of lechers, hypocrites and torturers. This temple will be kept closed as from today until all of you have fully purified yourselves."

"This temple is to remain closed! Who will dare to close it?" asked the old *sadhu* in a threatening voice. It was obvious that he was aching to raise his hand with the iron pincers.

Gurudev burst out laughing. "Who will close it, you ask? Of course, I will. I will do it in my capacity as the head of Lord Lakulesh's followers."

"Would you really dare?" shouted the old priest as he lifted his hand to strike Sarvagna. Samant jumped forward and seized the old man's hand.

"Get out of the way, Samant," said Gurudev calmly. "Hardatt, you wish to hit me? Do so. Here is my head, your

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guru's. May your fall be complete." And Gurudev bent his head.

The old priest was confused. His grip on his iron pincers was loosened, and they slipped from his hand. He collapsed and fell on the floor. Slowly and without hurry, Sarvagna proceeded to lock up the door of the inner shrine of Tripurasundari's temple, a door that had not been closed for centuries.

"It is because of the combined sins of all of you that the third eye of Lord Shankar has opened. Like a veritable demon, Hammir is rushing here to destroy this temple. Until you have purified yourselves and the danger is removed, I shall not offer worship to Goddess Mahamaya."

Before the powerful spiritual personality of Sarvagna, the surrender of everyone present was complete; they slowly dispersed.

For a while Sarvagna stood in the emptied courtyard. As she lay with her head in her mother's lap, Chaula sobbed bitterly. She could not easily forget what she had gone through a little while earlier.

"Ganga, you had better take Chaula home," ordered Sarvagna. "I do not know what is to happen of this great place of pilgrimage!" Turning to Samant, who sat leaning against a wall, he went on: "Samant, my son, it is getting late. You had better get ready to depart."

"As you wish."

“Ganga, do you know this Chauhan? Chaula has applied sacred ashes on his and his father’s forehead. Do you remember that, Chaula?”

Chaula had come out from her trance. She had no difficulty in recognising Samant who stood in front of her. They looked at each other.

“Ganga, this is a brave Chauhan. He has gone through a terrible ordeal during the last fifteen days. Out of his large family, he alone survives to serve Lord Somanath. Take him to your house and feed him. He has had nothing to eat for long. On him depends the safety of all of us.” With these remarks, Sarvagna walked away, his head bent, his sad eyes seeing only the ground in front of him.

Chaula stood shy and embarrassed. The memory of the state in which Samant had seen her only a few minutes, earlier made her wish the earth to open and engulf her. The understanding and wise Ganga put her hands around her affectionately. She invited Samant to follow her and to give her and Chaula a full account of all that had happened to him and his father.

Samant spent a few pleasant hours that night telling the two women all that had happened to him and to his people since his earlier meeting with them. Chaula was filled with great pride as she listened to this brave man.

27.

PATAN GETS READY

FOR two hundred years, Anhilwad Patan was only a fort in the midst of the jungle, like several such forts in the valley of the River Saraswati in North Gujarat (Chalukya).

The Chawada chiefs of Anhilwad used to sally forth every year with a small force, harass the forces of the neighbouring chiefs, drive the Bhil population into the jungle, and establish their domination over the area. Sometimes, they were able to expand their territories; at others, they met with reverses.

There were times when, afraid of a powerful neighbour, they could not venture forth from their citadel; at others; their power would be felt as far as Lat (South Gujarat) and Saurashtra.

Anhilwad Patan's destiny must have been written in letters of gold. In the year 942 A.D., when Mulrajdev of the Chalukya dynasty came to its throne, Patan began to undergo a transformation. The neighbouring forests were cut down, and in the rich land that became available, well-planned villages were founded, assured of protection by the rulers of

Anhilwad. The higher caste people from Shrimal, Kanauj, Ujjain and Bhrigukutchra came and settled in these villages.

Even the brave warrior classes of Gujarat took service under the victorious ruler of Patan.

By skilful diplomacy and irresistible valour, Mulrajdev succeeded in extending the territory as well as the power of Anhilwad. Where there had been only a small fortress, there grew up a prosperous city. Traders of Cambay, Broach and Mangrol established their business houses there, bringing with them both wealth and prosperity.

Learned Brahmins from countries far and near also were attracted to come and establish centres of learning and culture.

Small cottages of mud walls were replaced by brickbuilt houses. Beautiful temples with sky-scaling spires, testifying both to the religious devotion of the people as also to their prosperity, were built. And around this expansion and development, there was constructed a new and much larger fort. Anhilwad, which was only a fort, became the city of Patan.

Mulrajdev's rule extended in all directions. The powerful ruler of Junagadh surrendered to him, as also the rulers of Kutch and Lat. Among the rulers, the ruler of Patan enjoyed the first place. The kings of Jhallor, Marwad and Thanak sought his alliance. The powerful Chakravarti kings of Ujjain made several attempts to crush this rising power but without

success. When Mulrajdev died, Anhilwad Patan had become the capital of a powerful kingdom.

Lord Somanath was the family deity of Mulrajdev. His descendants were also fortunate. Though his son Chamund, and his grandson Durlabhsingh, were weak and short-sighted, they were followed by Bheemdev, a disciple of Gang Sarvagna, the high priest of the shrine of Somanath.

And now as the Hammir of Garjan was marching with great speed to destroy the temple of Lord Somanath at Prabhas, by the grace of the Lord, a powerful personality like Bheemdev was ruling over Anhilwad. He pledged himself to destroy the foreigner. What neither the king of Lohakot nor the powerful Balamdev was able to do, Bheemdev was now getting ready to achieve. The challenge that he thus took up was greeted warmly all over the neighbouring territories by the warrior classes of Kutch, Sorath, Gujarat, Lat and Konkan.

Anhilwad Patan became the rallying centre. The people of different States vied keenly with each other to fight under its flag. Rulers who were rivals took pride in carrying out the commands of the brave ruler of Patan. Dadda Chalukya came from Bhargukutch; King Ratnaditya, forgetting decades of enmity, came from Junagadh; Lakhani came from Kutch, and Trilochanpal Parmar from Abu.

It became the supreme ambition of every ruler from Dwaraka to Vansvada and Daman to Abu to rally to the defence of Lord Somanath. Three factors combined to unite

Gujarat and magnify the greatness of Patan: readiness to accept the command of the brave leader; devotion to the shrine of Lord Somanath; and unflinching determination to drive back the aggressor.

Bheem was perhaps the most brilliant star in the galaxy of shining stars. He was a born leader. As occasion demanded, he as readily praised the brave, as he mercilessly condemned the cowardly. His large eyes shone with the fanaticism of an enthusiast. Sometimes he rode amongst his soldiers, firing them with his own tremendous enthusiasm.

Often he spent his time planning tactical moves against his great adversary. In every village, his message had spread that every able-bodied man must rally to his forces in order to fight the foreign hordes. And in response to his invitation, recruits in large numbers poured in every day from miles around. Bheemdev and his minister Vimal were busy night and day in seeing that the men were well equipped with weapons, that they were well trained in the proper use of their weapons, that they were grouped in proper formations, and that their every legitimate need was met.

In every village, people talked of nothing but this tremendous and enthusiastic preparation for war. Inspired by it, young men, burning with a desire to fight for their land and shrine, left their homes, and their women, with anguished hearts, blessed their brave men and bade them god-speed. Everyone was thoroughly worked up to fight under Bheem and to throw back the invader. It was in the midst of such

enthusiastic men that Bheem moved with a smiling face and confident heart.

In a small room of the palace in Patan, Damodar Mehta, Bheem's powerful minister, sat making his plans. For several days he had not had a moment's rest or sleep. As reports reached him of the progress of Hammir, his anxiety increased. He sent away women, children and the aged from Patan to Pavagadh, directed the traders to go to Bhargukutch (Broach), or Khambhayat (Cambay), and provided facilities for those who could not fight, to be sent off to distant areas. To meet the contingency of Hammir's laying siege to Patan, he arranged for large quantities of food grains and water to be stored in order that his capital should be able to resist for a long time. He converted the merchant ships at the sea port, Cambay, into fighting vessels. He visited neighbouring kingdoms, negotiated with each of them a treaty of friendship, and skilfully arranged for their armed forces to join the forces of Patan.

But he was not content with these preparations. He took upon himself the responsibility for maintaining law and order in every village of Gujarat. Lest Hammir should treat the innocent people who may fall into his hands with cruelty, he arranged that women and children from every village that lay on the invader's route should be sent to distant and well-protected places. All this work he did with a smiling face and pleasant words.

His Minister, Vimal Mantri, was right when he said

that he had never seen Damodar Mehta lose his temper. But more. Mehta was ready to find a way out of every difficulty.

Thus was Gujarat made ready to give Hammir a warm reception.

For three days, every soldier had only one topic of conversation and that was something which spread despondency all round. It was said that Ghogha Bapa, the ruler of the desert, had been killed by Hammir, and that his ghost had come to Gujarat to protect Lord Somanath. Some claimed to have seen the ghost, some even to have talked with it. The ghost was advising everybody to run away, into the jungle, and to harass Hammir from the rear, as he was much too strong for a successful frontal attack. Such was the general talk, which made even strong hearts feel uneasy. The fanciful stories were that Arjan Ghadhvi, who had himself seen the ghost and talked to it, had arrived in Patan and narrated the incident to Bheemdev; and the brave King had laughed it all off. But merely because Bheemdev scoffed at it could not make a fact untrue, and many people, with doubt in their hearts, shook their heads at such disbelief.

Everywhere people talked of the ghost of Ghogha Bapa. Some said that it was the image of Ghogha Bapa when he was young. Its eyes were terrifying and its skin was taut and dry. It had a deep wound in its neck dripping blood. This description was repeated so often that every citizen in Patan talked about it familiarly, as if each one of them had seen the ghost himself.

Bheemdev's army was encamped for miles around Patan and its number was increasing every day. One evening on the outskirts of the camp, some sentries were sitting gossiping, and the topic of their gossip was Ghogha Bapa's ghost. Suddenly, they saw at a distance a moving cloud of dust. The sentries immediately became attentive and downed their armour. They were soon able to distinguish four camels, coming towards them at great speed. One of the sentries alerted all the others around the camp.

Another went forward to meet the first camel on which was seated a young man. The moment he saw the rider, he was petrified. Here was the ghost they had been thinking about, the same eyes that struck terror, the same pale skin, the same wound on the neck. "Who are you?" he asked trembling in every limb.

"I am Chauhan. I am coming from Somanath to meet Maharaj Bheemdev."

"Ghogha Bapa!" exclaimed the soldier involuntarily. The young man did not smile. How could a ghost smile? He did not deny the identity either. How could he, when it was a fact? The camel rider moved forward. A second and a third soldier reacted identically and the word soon spread from soldier to soldier as the young man rode on fearlessly without let or hindrance towards the royal fort.

When the young man arrived at the fort's gate with his camels, he saw that a large number of soldiers had collected in front of it. It was already dark. The young man made his

camel kneel and dismounted, followed by his companion, an old Brahmin. They were both immediately surrounded by the soldiers.

"I wish to meet Bheemdev Maharaj. I have brought a message for him from Prabhas," said the young man.

An old keeper came out from within the fort and began pushing back the crowd of soldiers. He was accompanied by a torch-bearer. The men readily gave way so that the old man could check who the young visitor was. As soon as he saw the young man in the torchlight, he was astounded and his eyes opened wide with fear. He clapped his hands to his eyes. "Oh my God! It is Ghogha Bapa!" he shouted and turned to run back into the fort. The soldiers turned pale.

"Arjan Ghadhvi," said the young man in a firm tone. "Please tell Bheemdev Maharaj that I wish to see him on a matter of great importance."

The old man, Arjan Ghadhvi, and his torch-bearer walked ahead swiftly towards the palace, leaving Samant and his old companion standing out in the dark. The soldiers who had also recognised the newcomer, dispersed quickly. Without hesitation and with measured steps, the young man walked in the direction taken by Arjan Ghadhvi.

28.

THE WARRIORS MEET

A CONFERENCE of the allied rulers was held that evening in the big audience hall of the royal fort of Patan. Proudly, Bheemraj presided over it, twirling his moustache. On his right hand sat Ra Ratnaditya of Junagadh, a middle-aged and impressive figure: he had come forgetting his hereditary enmity dating back to the time when Mulraj had vanquished his grandfather and reduced him to a vassal of the Chalukyas.

By his side sat the old warrior of Kutch, Kamo Lakhani, whose scarred face, framed in his enormous white beard, bore witness to his valour in the battlefield. He had only one eye but with that he could see far and more clearly than most people did with two eyes.

To the left of Bheemdev was seated Dadda of the ruling family of Bharuch. He had come because he was afraid of the power of Patan; his only anxiety was to find out how soon he could return.

Next to him sat Trilochanpal Parmar, an eighteen-year-old youngster and a great admirer of Bheemdev, looking at

his idol with worshipful eyes. The two ministers of Bheemdev, Damodar Mehta and Vimal, were seated opposite Bheemdev. They were surrounded by other minor ministers and commanders of the forces of different rulers.

The question under discussion at the moment was: Should they advance and confront Hammir, or wait where they were and give him battle there?

"It is my considered view that we ought to advance," remarked Bheemdev. "There is always an advantage in taking the offensive. The enemy would hardly be able to resist an onslaught by an army such as ours."

Damodar Mehta, shaking his head, said with a smile: "Maharaj, it would be unwise for us to underestimate the strength of an invader who has advanced thus far after inflicting defeat upon so many great rulers."

"But you do not seem to take account of the size and strength of our army. Moreover, by the time he comes near enough, it will be even larger and stronger. His army, on the other hand, will be a tired army, while ours will be fresh," insisted Bheemdev.

"And, what is more, he will be fighting on an unfamiliar terrain," supported Ra Ratna, the king of Junagadh.

"Do not forget that he was unfamiliar with the desert also," said Damodar. "If we advance and are defeated, there will be no one between him and Prabhas. If, on the other hand, we compel him to lay a siege on Patan, it will take him

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six months and more before he can hope to make further progress."

"And he and his men would be more tired," remarked Trilochanpal supporting this view.

"No," countered Bheemdev very firmly. "If we shut ourselves up behind the walls of Patan when we have an army such as this, we should only be disgracing ourselves." In his enthusiasm he raised himself to his knees and sat up erect. "I would like to descend upon Hammir and his men like lightning and destroy his army. I consider that Lord Mahadev has given me this life in order that I should be the instrument of destroying this invader. Mehtaji, we will advance, and let us see who dares to stop us. With the combined strength of all Gujarat, we shall succeed in putting the enemy to flight. Let those amongst us who disapprove of this bold policy, return home. The rest of us will go forward and earn immortality by defeating Hammir." As he concluded, Bheemdev's eyes shone brightly and reflected the confidence he felt in himself.

"Well done, well done," was the spontaneous exclamation of a number of warriors. Bheem's words roused them and made them eager for action.

"What do you think will Hammir be capable of doing, tired as he will be after his long journey across the desert?" asked Ra Ratna of Junagadh, once again turning to Damodar Mehta. Everybody present appeared to feel that Bheemdev's Prime Minister was raising unnecessary objections.

"Do you think," persisted Damodar Mehta, "that he who was capable of overcoming the hardships of the desert will be exhausted now when he has to travel through only this fertile land?"

"If he is not tired, we will make him tired. You, Mehtaji, may remain behind in Patan and send us whatever help we require. I am quite confident that we shall destroy this enemy of Lord Mahadev, and free this holy land. So long as Lord Somanath is on our side, what can this Hammir do?" asked Bheemdev.

"Maharaj, how absolutely right you are," was the enthusiastic response he evoked.

Old Kamo Lakhani's solitary eye brightened as he called out in a loud voice: "Have we worn bangles on our hands?"

"Who would say such a thing of us?" challenged Bheemdev, jumping up from his seat.

"My lord! Ghogha Bapa!" cried Arjan Ghadhvi as if in answer to this question as he tumbled into the room, out of breath and in terror. His turban was in disarray and there was fear in his eyes. His hands too were trembling like aspen leaves. Everybody stared incredulously at him.

"What is the matter, Ghadhvi," demanded Bheemdev angrily. "What has happened?"

"My lord, Ghogha Bapa has come," replied Arjan and he covered his eyes. The entire assembly stood up, startled. Only Bheemdev remained unperturbed. He looked at the trembling Ghadhvi with impatience.

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"Whoever it be, Ghadhvi, let him come in. I am not afraid to meet even the God of Death."

As Samant walked in, he looked pale, but composed and determined, looking steadily and boldly at every man in the gathering. There was no doubt: the resemblance was uncanny—the same eyes, the same skin, the same wound as Ghogha Bapa's.

"Maharaj, I am Samant, the grandson of Ghogha Bapa. Victory to Bheemdev Maharaj! Jaya Somanath." He prostrated himself at the feet of Bheemdev.

Vimal recognised him immediately and before the others could regain their composure, he said: "Welcome, brave, Chauhan."

Bheemdev took a step forward and embraced Samant. "My brave Chauhan, your family has won salvation for seventy-one generations of Rajputs. Come, Come, my friend."

Firmly but courteously Samant freed himself from the powerful embrace of Bheemdev, and went and stood some distance away, stern and aloof, and without a trace of emotion on his face. It did not take long for everybody to realise that they had in front of them not a ghost, but a living man. Only Arjan Ghadhvi refused to believe it.

"Sit down, Chauhan," said Bheemdev, as he once again took him by the hand and made him sit by his side. Samant complied respectfully, folding his two legs under him. "Tell

us, where have you come from and what news have you brought," continued Bheemdev.

"I bring a message from Gurudev Gang Sarvagna."

"That means you come from Prabhas. When did you go there?" asked Damodar Mehta.

"As soon as I was released by Hammir, I went straight to Prabhas. Our family priest, Nandidutt, who waits outside, will bear me out."

'Nandidutt? Why have you left him outside? Let me bring him in," said Damodar Mehta, concerned. He went out, and led in Nandidutt with the courtesy and respect due to the old family priest of Ghogha Bapa. Tears streamed out of the old man's eyes.

"Welcome to our court," said Bheemdev. The entire assembly then sat down, and Nandidutt, in reply to Bheemdev's question, narrated briefly the story of the destruction of Ghogha Bapa's clan.

"Where was Hammir's camp when you left it, and when did you leave it?" asked Damodar Mehta, anxious to bring the conversation back to what was of immediate importance.

"In the desert, a short distance away from the boundaries of Marwad. I rode straight from the camp to Prabhas in order to warn Gurudev, and from there I have come here, travelling as fast as my camel could bring me."

"How far away, do you think, is Hammir from here?"

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"I believe, not more than fifteen days' journey from here."

"You have seen Hammir's army?" asked Bheemdev.

"Seen it?" echoed Samant, in a dejected voice. "I have moved among those troops and I have estimated their strength. I have also measured Hammir's own strength. That is what I wanted to convey to Gurudev and he ordered me to tell you, sir, whatever I had to say, because you are the right hand of Lord Somanath."

"Whatever Gurudev commands, I shall carry out," said Bheemdev simply. "Chauhanraj, please tell me without hesitation whatever you wish to say."

"The first thing I want to tell you is that if you are planning to fight Hammir face to face, give up that idea." Samant's words, spoken slowly, electrified the entire gathering. Everyone listened with rapt attention and amazement. What Samant advised was the opposite of the action they had all favoured a little while ago.

"What do you mean? I, a Chalukya of Patan, am not to fight the enemy face to face!" exclaimed Bheemdev angrily. His eyes were red with anger, as if ready to burn Samant in their fire.

Samant sat unperturbed. There was a contemptuous smile on his face. In the course of a few days he had gone through lifetime experience and he had become aged while still in the bloom of youth.

"My lord, forgive me. I am tired of listening to such proud and arrogant talk." Everyone strained his ears to catch his softly spoken words. "Chalukyaraj, it seems to me that Lord Pinakpani has sent this Hammir in order to destroy our short-sighted and disunited rulers."

The rulers present heard the audacious words of the young man in anger and amazement. Bheemdev involuntarily placed his right hand on his sword, an action which did not escape Samant's keen eyes. Realising that Samant had seen his instinctive gesture of impatience, he took off his hand quickly from the sword.

"Chalukyaraj," continued Samant, "we are all inclined to think in our pride that it would be child's play to defeat Hammir. The truth is that we would only be rushing to our doom, even as the animals get trapped in the mouth of a python. It is blind pride of this kind that made Ghogha Bapa lead his entire family to destruction, or Balamdev to sacrifice fifty-thousand of his soldiers. And now you are all getting ready to take the same line."

"Just what do you mean?" asked Ra Ratnaditya in a sarcastic tone. "Do you mean that we should all now go home from here?"

"No. Do what you think is right, but first make a proper assessment of the Hammir and his strength. You may resent what I tell you, but I am not exaggerating—the forces you have collected will be put to flight by Hammir's army in no time whatever!"

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Bheemdev had been watching Samant keenly during this interchange. He was not yet sure if Samant was a friend or foe. He might well have interrupted the young man, but he had held back because he had observed Damodar Mehta nodding in approval of what Samant was saying.

"Maharaj," resumed Samant, "if you had any idea of Hammir's strength and organising ability, you would say the same thing. Even if you had ten times the forces that you have today, you would not be able to defeat him."

"We are not going to be frightened in this way," remarked Bheemdev slightly, unable to restrain himself any longer. "Only a coward could say that we are few and the enemy many."

For a moment Samant's face flushed with anger, but he controlled himself. Then an extraordinary sternness came over his face and an unearthly brightness in his eyes. He stood up erect and joined his palm as a token of respect before Bheemdev, and what he uttered was like the fearful hiss of a serpent.

"Had anyone but you, King Bheemdev, called me a coward, I would have killed him on the spot. But I have not come here today to quarrel with you. I have come to do my best to help in ensuring the defence of Lord Somanath. Your interest lies in keeping alive your kingdom and your rule, but I have no other desire except to see that Hammir dies. You have only heard of Hammir, but my grandfather, Ghogha Bapa, had sacrificed the lives of his entire clan in his effort

to stop Hammir's onward progress. My father showed incredible bravery in making him wander all over the desert and lose men, equipment and time. I have ventured alone into his camp and attempted to take his life with a dagger. Had I succeeded, I would have done single-handed what hundreds of thousands of Rajputs have failed to do." His voice faltered a little before he resumed: "But perhaps it was not the wish of Lord Somanath that Hammir should die then. Bheemdev Maharaj, if you do as much as my family and I have done, Lord Shiv will surely give you victory."

Samant bent low, and was about to leave, but Damodar Mehta stood up and stopped him. "Valiant Chauhan," he said pleasantly. "Maharaj would rather cut off his tongue before he would ever call a Chauhan of Ghoghagadh a coward. The place of any descendant of Ghogha Bapa has always been by the side of the throne on which the descendants of the Sun and the Moon sit."

This immediately brought sobriety to Bheemdev, who stood up and embraced Samant. "Chauhan, forgive me for what I said a while ago. I was hasty. We have yet to show our courage, while you have already shown yourself worthy of your great ancestors. Forgive me." And then with great charm and affection, he embraced Samant once again. Won over by such sincere frankness, he resumed his seat.

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SAMANT'S ADVICE ACCEPTED

"BRAVE Chauhan," said Damodar Mehta, "what you are saying is precisely what I have been saying to Maharaj. There is nothing to be gained by a frontal attack on Hammir."

"Mehtaji, replied Samant sadly, "it gives me no pleasure to give this advice. I also belong to a family which is proud and would rather die than turn tail and lose honour. But today if I venture to offer advice to my elders, it is only because of what I have gone through and learnt in the past six weeks."

"Chauhan, you may speak to us without reserve," said Bheemdev encouragingly.

"Maharaj," resumed Samant, "what Hammir has is not just an ordinary army. It is like a mighty ocean. You have perhaps at the most twenty thousand infantry, five thousand cavalry...."

"Eight thousand," corrected Bheemdev.

"Eight thousand. At the most you have two hundred elephants and camels. Maharaj, Hammir has thirty thousand

cavalry men, a thousand elephants and countless thousands of infantrymen. He carries water for use in the desert, laden upon thirty thousand camels at the very least. He has huge machines to destroy fortress walls. We would not stand any chance against him. Had the lakhs of Rajputs who fought him between Nagarkot and Marwad in small groups joined together, they might have made an impression; but even then they would not have been enough." Samant paused amidst pindrop silence in the entire gathering.

"And then?" prompted Damodar Mehta.

"This is merely an account of the strength of his army. Then you must take account of the quality of Hammir himself. Few men can compare with him as a leader of so large an army. He knows how to make friends, how to convert men without courage into brave warriors! His skill as a tactician is matchless. How will you fight such a man?"

"What shall we do then? Should we, protectors of cows and Brahmins, allow such a foreign invader to march through our soil without offering resistance? Shall we see our womenfolk raped and our Brahmins tortured? Should we not sacrifice our lives for the protection of our God?"

"Maharaj, I do not say that we let Hammir have his way," rejoined Samant. "You must fight, but you must fight intelligently. You have to save Prabhas as well as this Patan of yours."

"But how?"

"Let Hammir enter Saurashtra without resistance. Let him through, and then harass him from the rear."

"I entirely agree. There is too much risk in taking on Hammir in a straight fight," intervened Damodar Mehta. "I was of the view, however, that we should fight Hammir from within Patan."

"He has destroyed so many forts. What is one more to him?" answered Samant.

"There is truth in what you say," agreed the worried Damodar.

"But then what should we do?" asked Ra.

"And if I were to leave Patan and hide myself in the forest, my reputation would have gone for ever," said Bheemdev.

"Not only that. Your whole army would be demoralised," remarked Trilochanpal Parmar.

"Whatever may happen, I will not move from here. This is my Patan, the city of my forefathers. Whether I succeed in pushing back Hammir or not, I would rather be crushed beneath my own fortress walls!"

"But that is not how you will be able to protect Lord Somanath," drily remarked Samant. His soft and contemptuous voice lashed them like a whip.

"What should we do then?"

"I can see only one way," remarked Damodar Mehta.

"Hammir has fought against armies, but he has not fought the desert or areas devoid of people. That is the enemy which will puzzle him and defeat him."

"What do you mean?"

"It means that we let him come into Patan. Lay the way open for him to Patan, an empty Patan. Let him then tilt his lance against the wind."

"That is exactly the course I am proposing, Mehtaji," said Samant.

"But what am I to do? Hide myself?" asked Bheemdev dejectedly.

"No, Maharaj, no," smilingly rejoined Mehta. "You take the whole army to Prabhas. If we wish to win, we must make Hammir experience the difficulties of marching through the forests of Saurashtra."

"The fort of Prabhas is very small," remarked Ra, putting his finger on a possible weakness.

"It is small, but we can make it big. There we shall have the protection of Lord Somanath Himself and we shall be inspired and guided by Gurudev. Every Rajput who will fight there will fight not to protect his own State but his own God. He will have no other desire except to gain victory if he lives, and heaven if he dies."

Bheemdev's large eyes became more cheerful. He resumed twirling his moustaches. He now understood what was being proposed. In that instant, his imagination brought

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back the image of the delicate dancing girl emerging from the river; the picture vanished as speedily as it came.

"Yes, Mehtaji, I will fight in front of Lord Somanath and will display bravery such as has never before been heard of or seen. We will push the enemy's forces into the sea," he concluded with confidence.

"Mehtaji," said Samant, "your scheme is excellent. If we sacrifice everything that we have on that one final effort, we may avenge ourselves for the thousands we have lost — but I will stay on here alone."

"But we do not wish to let you die, Chauhan," said Damodar Mehta.

"Nor do I wish to die so long as Hammir treads the soil, which is mine. If you can, give me a few men. Am I not Ghogha Bapa's 'ghost'? In my own way, I shall cope with him and be of help to you."

"But you must be by my side, Samant," said Bheemdev.

"No, Maharaj. I do not wish to go back."

"That is a good idea," remarked Damodar Mehta. "I shall see that Prabhas receives what it needs from Cambay by sea. It will be necessary to vacate Patan immediately."

"But Vimal will remain with me?"

"Certainly, Maharaj," answered Vimal.

That same evening Bheemdev took steps to put this decision into force. Soldiers on horseback were sent out in

all directions to ask everyone to vacate the city. During the night many cartloads with foodgrains were sent out from Patan to Prabhas. At dawn the whole army too started marching towards Saurashtra.

At midday when Bheemdev left Patan, there were left behind only Samant, Nandidutt and five hundred horsemen whom he had placed at Samant's disposal. Bheemdev had tried his best before leaving to make Samant change his mind, but Samant had remained firm.

When the last soldier had left Patan, Samant climbed up to the highest tower of the fort and gazed towards the horizon. "Come, Hammir, I am waiting for you," he muttered with clenched teeth.

30.

BHEEMDEV ARRIVES IN PRABHAS

THE news that Bheemdev was coming to Prabhas with his army raised the morale of the people immensely. Living under the protection of their god, they did not fear Hammir. What could even a powerful invader do against Lord Somanath who was capable of burning to ashes the great monster Tripurasur with his third eye?

The town busied itself with preparations to welcome Bheemdev like a triumphant victor. Every house, every street, was gaily decorated. New flags began to flutter on the top of every temple, while the streets resounded with music. Prayers were offered in the temples and every heart echoed one common feeling: the great warrior, Bheem, was about to come—Bheem, the destroyer of the invaders and the protector of the righteous.

Chaula climbed up to the tower on the roof of the temple and stood there watching the road to Patan. Her anxiety was betrayed by her eyes. Her young heart beat fast, because the great warrior Bheemdev was coming—Bheemdev, the ruler of Patan, the incarnation of God Rudra;

Bheemdev who had saved her from the terrible *kapali*, was coming. He had lifted her up in his arms and she had been thrilled to her very being. That was the moonlit night, soft and caressing, when she had gone into the sea for a bath, naked. She still could recall her scream at the sight of the terrible *kapali*. And when she had regained her consciousness, what she had seen was a powerful face, with bright and attractive eyes.

What an unforgettable night! It was an amazing incident in her young life, and the memory of it still filled her with delight. Her imagination converted that incident into a new and fresh experience. That powerful man was now coming to save her Lord Somanath from the demon-like invaders.

Her eyes were fixed upon the horizon, eager to welcome the great Bheem. Indescribable feelings arose in her heart. The strong breeze blowing from the sea was thrilling every limb of hers. 'Here he comes, Rudra's incarnation, here he comes' was the refrain that throbbed in every vein of her lissom body.

For the last two days, surprisingly her image of Lord Somanath itself had changed. On his coiled hair had been placed a crown and on that a peacock feather. On his dark, handsome face could be seen goodness and bravery. His moustaches had been oiled and curled up, while his beard had been trimmed. On his body there was an armour of gold and from his shoulder hung a bow and an arrow. Lord Shambu of the three-pronged spear had now incarnated as

Bheem, the great archer. His shoulder and his arms looked exactly as they had appeared that evening in the moonlight. All her efforts to calm her swiftly beating heart were in vain.

In whatever direction she looked, she saw people coming from Delwada and bullock-carts bringing foodgrains and other essential requirements from Patan. They were followed by a large number of horsemen, in rows of four or five.

Before she realised what she was doing, she screamed aloud with delight. The cavalry was being led by Bheemdev Maharaj, himself riding a magnificent white horse. The rays of the sun reflected in the gold embroidered saddle, in the glitter of which shone Bheemdev's impressive face, full, dark and handsome, set in unflinching determination.

As the horsemen came nearer, she was able to see Bheemdev as Rudra Himself. The cavalry, the elephants and the infantry led by him snaked forward like a giant river.

From where she was, she was able to see the wall of the lower fort. Gurudev who had gone to the main gate of Prabhas to welcome the ruler of Patan could be seen from there. With him there stood Shivarashi, enfeebled by a fast of penance which had already lasted for eighteen days, and a number of their disciples, leading the townsmen.

Suddenly there was a resounding shout of 'Jaya Somanath' from the mouths of thirty thousand warriors who had responded to the call of Bheemdev Maharaj as he

arrived near the fort. The whole atmosphere was electrified. Gurudev, his disciples, and the townsmen echoed 'Jaya Somanath' in response. A thousand drums broke the quiet that had prevailed only a little while before.

As he approached the fort, Bheemdev looked up to the top of the temple and for a moment his eyes were fixed upon the temple flag which was flying in its full glory. Then his gaze came down and fixed itself upon the lower balcony. Chaula's eyes met this gaze for a second or two, and she was overwhelmed with shyness. Bheemdev failed to recognise her and his gaze turned to Gurudev who was standing near the gate. Her heart stopped beating as she realised the difference between her own humble status as a *devadasi* and that of the ruler of Patan who had come there to destroy, the invading Turks. Like one wounded, she screamed aloud and without looking back, rushed down the steps. Her great Lord Shiva had come there in person but she, unknown, unaccepted, was not fit for Him!

As she came down to the ground floor, panting, she heard Ganga call out, "Chaula, where are you running to?"

"Nowhere, mother, nowhere," she replied without stopping. But before she had gone a few steps, suddenly she stopped. Her heart beating fast, she rushed towards Ganga and embraced her. "Mother, it will soon be midday. Whose turn is it to perform the dance today?"

"Why? I think it must be Kundla's turn."

"No, mother, I would like to dance today, now, right away."

"But are you sure that you will show up at your best, dancing in the middle of the day?"

"I do not care. I must dance now."

"We will fix your turn this evening. Will that not do?"

"No. I must dance now. If you do not agree, I shall kill myself."

"But Kundla will be offended."

"In that case, do your best to pacify her. But mother, please do not say 'no'. Let me do it."

It did not take long for Ganga to understand the significance of all this excitement—Chaula's wide open eyes, the rapid rise and fall of her breast, and the scarcely concealed impatience in her voice. Without further argument, she said: "Very well, Chaula, get ready. I shall go and break the news to Kundla."

The joyous Chaula began her dance in front of Lord Somanath. Today she was offering worship to her Lord Shiva, about to go to war, that gave a special edge to her art. There was a new springiness in her feet and unwonted grace in her movements. Her eyes did not rest as usual on the image of Lord Somanath, but on the road leading to the shrine. She was certain Bheemdev would come to offer worship before the Lord, and that when he came, he would, without a doubt, recognise her. And she would dance only for him.

The sound of the drums came nearer and the shouts of men grew louder as they came closer. Gurudev and Bheemdev entered first through the gate of the inner fort. They were followed by other kings, ministers and generals. Chaula felt her heart beat faster and faster. Her feet became unsteady and her voice broke.

Gurudev and Bheemdev entered the dance-hall engrossed in serious conversation. Chaula found Bheem the same as before; the same face, the same eyes, the same gait. But today the face was grave, the eyes were stern and the gait firm. This was not the Bheemdev of that night; this was an unknown and powerful warrior who knew her not. Chaula's feet kept dancing, but her heart was silently weeping.

When Gang Sarvagna and the great Bheem entered the inner shrine of the temple together, Chaula's hopes were dashed to the ground. Bheemdev's eyes fell on her for a moment and made her heart miss a beat. But his mind was preoccupied; he might have been looking at a stranger! He did not recognise her. Chaula was on the verge of collapse.

Bheemdev Maharaj and the rulers accompanying him offered worship according to the rites. The background for their worship was provided by the song sung by the dancer, like the death song of a royal swan, piteous and heart-piercing.

As soon as all of them came out of the inner sanctum, Gurudev raised his hands appealing for complete silence.

Everybody fell silent; only the dance and the music continued according to the traditional practice. Bheemdev, without looking at the singer, called out in a loud harsh voice demanding that the music be stopped. Chaula's song and dance stopped abruptly, like the half-uttered words of a dying man.

"Devotees of the Lord," said Gurudev in his slow solemn voice, "Lord Somanath has created this crisis in order to test us. In eight or ten days, the enemy will arrive at our gates. From today onwards, I entrust all the authority that I enjoy over this abode of Lord Somanath to Bheemdev Maharaj. Everyone of you must carry out his orders implicitly. He is completely devoted to Lord Somanath, and in turn is blessed by the Lord."

There was pin-drop silence as he finished. It was as if for the first time everyone present had come to realise the full gravity of the imminent danger.

"I am only an instrument and I shall do as the Lord Somanath desires," said Bheemdev in his deep and authoritative voice. "A most dangerous enemy is knocking at our doors, and his ability to destroy is very great. With God's blessings, we shall be able to overcome him."

He paused a little and let his eyes rest upon everyone. As before he saw Chaula, but there was no warmth of recognition in it. Then he resumed: "During the last two days some ships have come from Cambay and have entered the

harbour. Tomorrow some more will come. All the citizens—Brahmins, women and children—must leave Prabhas. They may take away with them their belongings if they wish, but they must leave behind their stocks of food. My troops will live in the homes of all who have left.”

Then he turned to his minister and said with an authoritative gesture, “Vimal, see to it that the whole city is vacated in the shortest possible time. And, Gurudev, please have this music and dance stopped at once. Only after Hammir is vanquished with Somanath’s blessings shall these ceremonies be resumed in this temple.”

And with a parting glance of irresistible authority, Bheemdev left the shrine accompanied by Gurudev and the kings and the ministers.

31.

GURUDEV'S RESOLVE

THERE was an uproar among the assembled people. Chaula, barely conscious, placed her hands on her eyes and rushed blindly to her home. The people, stunned by the prospects of an impending calamity, were in no mood to take any notice of her.

As soon as she reached her home, Chaula threw herself on her bed, fully clothed and bejewelled. She wept bitterly. Her Lord had come, and had gone away without recognising her! The gates of heaven had opened, but before she could even peep inside, they had been closed.

But Chaula's assumption that her dancing and singing had gone unnoticed was not correct. In spite of his eighteen day's fast and his sufferings during that period, Shivarashi's eyes had, never once left Chaula. As a loyal disciple, he had obediently carried out the orders of his *guru*; in fact, he had no alternative because if he had failed to do so, Gurudev would have deprived him of his position as the leading disciple. In his heart, however, there was a veritable storm.

Gurudev had humiliated him and had taken away his authority. That he, Gurudev, should have put a stop to the ceremony to Tripurasundari was an unforgivable lapse, more so as he had done all this merely to please the daughter of a temple dancer. If anyone had to perform penance, it was Gurudev! And it was because of his sins that the Goddess had sent the invader to destroy him.

As the foodless days went by, Shivarashi's mind became clearer and he began to see the hand of Goddess Tripurasundari in what was happening. Hammir was certain to win and the *guru* would be removed from his position. Then he, Shivarashi, would step into his shoes and become Sarvagna. Mahamaya Tripurasundari, the Mother of the Creation, was tolerant, no doubt, but how could she tolerate being treated with such disrespect!

Every time he thought of the power of Mahamaya, he could not help thinking of Chaula. The Chaula he had worshipped that eventful evening was a Chaula he would never be able to forget, awake or asleep. He kept seeing her face even in his dreams. He longed for an opportunity to complete the ceremony that he had been compelled to leave half finished. In his dreams, he often saw himself completing the ceremony. But every time he woke up, he felt distressed. He became happy when he heard of Hammir's approaching invasion! Without such an upheaval there was little chance that the traditional worship of Mahamaya would be re-established.

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It was when Shivarashi had reached this stage in his thinking that Bheemdev had arrived in Prabhas. Shivarashi had overheard a little talk between Gurudev and Bheemdev: everyone was to leave for Kambhayat (Cambay). If Gurudev did not agree to go, then it would be his duty to escort the people to Cambay, and once there, he would propagate the cult of Lakulesh. Chaula would no doubt be among those going to Cambay. He had heard that Bheemdev and Chaula had met on, that eventful night when the *Kapali* died but now things were different. Bheemdev would not be accompanying her to Kambhayat.

He was very happy when he saw that Bheemdev did not throw even a glance at Chaula in the temple: he did not so much as recognise her. Shivarashi's imagination, heightened by his fasting, was influenced by Chaula's singing and dancing. When with Gurudev's tacit consent Bheemdev had put a stop to the dance, he was greatly incensed. Really, Gurudev had exceeded his temporal authority and had become unworthy of respect!

Shivarashi joined Gurudev and Bheemdev when they left the temple. At the foot of the temple steps, Gurudev turned towards him and said: "Shivarashi, go, end your penance and eat some food. In the face of this great calamity, your first duty is now to the people of Prabhas."

Shivarashi bowed with folded hands and left. Before breaking his fast, he felt he ought to worship Goddess Mahamaya for whose sake he had suffered penance and

punishment. That he was prompted to do so by unholy passion for Chaula never struck him.

His feet turned towards Ganga's house. The door was open and he walked straight in. To his surprise, he found Chaula lying face down upon her bed, and she had fallen fast asleep. For quite some time, Shivarashi feasted his eyes upon her lovely figure; he trembled in every limb; his eyes shone with a fierce light. He wanted to worship this beautiful woman in whose body Goddess Mahamaya had entered. Time enough for it when Gurudev would no longer be there. Hammir would be coming in a few days to destroy him. The ritual worship could wait. For the present, all he wanted was to relieve his tense feelings. His attention was drawn to one of Chaula's feet, which appeared to him like a tender rose bending from the stem, full of thin blue veins. To this foot he decided to offer homage. Controlling his passion with great difficulty, he touched the foot, the foot of Mahamaya incarnate, with his head. Chaula woke up with a start. Affrighted to see Shivarashi kneeling by her bed emaciated, ugly and fierce, she jumped up with a loud shout and rushed out of her room as if she was pursued by a demon.

Shivarashi slowly stood up. How could the slighted Tripurasundari accept this worship? His mind full of turmoil, he went to his own quarters. After sending for Siddeshwar and Hardatt, he broke his fast.

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Hardatt arrived promptly. That fanatical priest had been deeply hurt by the interrupted worship of Tripurasundari. For fifty long years, long before Gang Sarvagna had been officially installed as the head of the shrine, he had been a devotee of the temple of Tripurasundari. He had seen innumerable festivals and had officiated at many.

For the first time in his memory, the full ritual of ceremonies had remained unperformed. Worse, he had been deprived of his right to offer worship to Goddess Mahamaya. For him, it was as if the world had ceased to exist. Speechless, like a man demented, he spent his time wandering near the temple of Mahamaya. Occasionally, he would take a pilgrim to some dark corner and persuade him to perform strange ceremonies.

"Hardatt," said Shivarashi, "a great danger has come upon us."

"Oh!" exclaimed Hardatt.

"What do you think it is? Because we were not able to perform fully the worship of the great Goddess, the Mother of Creation, a great calamity is about to descend upon us."

"You are right."

"We must, therefore, complete the worship and offer penance for the sin that we committed. Unless we do that, we will not be able to escape this calamity."

"No one can escape Mahamaya's anger," confirmed Hardatt.

"We must offer worship to Mahamaya. Tomorrow we will have to go to Kambhayat. You must come with me. We shall offer worship to Mahamaya there."

"Very well, I will do as you say."

"Do you know, Chaula will also be with us?"

"Rashiji, Heaven knows what will happen if Mahamaya is angry. But one thing is certain. Whoever comes in the way of her worship will not escape punishment," asserted Hardatt confidently.

"Nonsense," said Shivarashi. "You wait here. I have to go." And the chief disciple of Gang Sarvagna, after having put into motion his scheme for overcoming the calamity, went to Gurudev.

Chaula did not stop running until she arrived at the temple. She rushed to her mother who was engaged in cleaning the 'bili' leaves to be offered to the deity. "Mother, mother, that man is chasing me."

"Who, Bheemdev?"

"What nonsense are you talking? I am referring to Rashiji."

"You must be mad. Have you seen Bheemdev Maharaj?"

"Mother, do not ask me." And as she said this, Chaula's eyes were filled with tears. "I am an unfortunate woman. I am not destined to be happy." She burst into tears. Ganga

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tried her best to console her. "Mother, tomorrow we are leaving for Kambhayat."

"If Sarvagna so desires."

"Shouldn't we get it confirmed by him?"

"Why are you so anxious to leave this place?" asked Ganga.

"My Lord Shambhu does not want me. I cannot please Him with my dances. What does it matter whether I am alive or dead?" And she began to sob.

"Come along. Let us go and inquire." Ganga seized Chaula by her hands and went towards Gurudev's residence. When she learnt that Gurudev was busy, she sat by the door of his room. Chaula sat next to her. Both of them were able to overhear the talk, though neither could see inside.

"Bheemdev, let Hammir come," they heard Gurudev say, "the Linga of Lord Somanath will never be removed from here."

"But, Gurudev, if something adverse were to happen, what then?" asked Ra Ratnaditya of Junagadh.

"As long as the power of the Lord prevails, the most powerful of demons will not be able to do any damage. How can any mortal do any harm?"

"But Hammir has destroyed many shrines already. They say he is an idol-breaker," said Minister Vimal.

"Your faith has been undermined. Who could dare to

destroy the Lord? My faith is as firm as ever. The Lord is eternal and immutable. There is no power on earth which can remove Him from its shrine."

"Please do not say so, Gurudev," urged Bheem. "Our faith is unshaken."

"You think of Hammir, I don't. Not a blade of grass can grow unless it is the wish of the Lord. Who is Hammir to disobey the Lord?"

"But, Gurudev," said Ra, "we are ordinary worldly beings. We must think of both victory and defeat."

"Victory and defeat are what fools think of," said Gurudev. "It is my Lord Somanath who determines who wins and who loses."

"Gurudev, let there be no mistake, we are also quite determined. As long as we are alive, we will not let once single brick of the shrine of our Lord be disturbed. But if we are killed, what then?" asked Ra of Junagadh.

"Who can protect whom? Ra, what you are saying may be wisdom, may be prudence, but my God must remain here. He cannot be moved. As long as strong and powerful men like you are prepared to give their lives, why talk of defeat? Fight and win. God is on your side."

"I agree," said Bheemdev. "As long as our Lord has his trident, victory is ours. But when invasion threatens"

"No, my boy," interrupted Gurudev, "The Lord

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manifested Himself when the world was created and He will remain here when the world is destroyed."

"Then you go to Cambay. On you depends the continuance of the Pashupat cult."

"My dear disciples," said Gurudev softly but firmly, "when will you understand me? I am not fond of this position. Nor am I desirous of holding the first position in the Lakulesh hierarchy. I am only a humble servant of the Lord. Where He is, there I shall be. I cannot imagine a life apart from Him."

"But this is not a task for saints. This is our task."

"Bheemdev, is there any sphere of action which is not for those dedicated to the Lord? Where there are no saints, there is no virtue, and where there is no virtue, there can be no victory."

"But as long as you are alive"

"Let us leave this subject alone," interjected Gang Sarvagna. "Samant had also been pressing this view. But I have made up my mind. Where Lord Somanath is, there I remain. Let the enemy do his worst. Even if there is no one to fight the enemy, I alone will! Who knows what miracles I am destined to perform?"

Ganga's eyes became moist at hearing Sarvagna's softly spoken but grim decision. Bheemdev and the other warriors became speechless before the unshakable determination of the old man.

32.

BHEEMDEV ASSUMES COMMAND

AFTER a short silence, Gang Sarvagna resumed: "Take away all my disciples. They are the pillars of the Lakulesh sect. It is necessary to preserve their learning and their saintliness. Shivarashi, you and Gaganrashi should accompany everyone to Kambhayat."

"As you command, Gurudev," said Shivarashi. Gaganrashi, who was next in the hierarchy to Shivarashi, accepted the command with folded hands and without uttering a word.

"I shall send away the merchants this evening," said Vimal. "Tomorrow morning will be the turn of the Brahmins."

"Yes, I require no one's assistance," said Gurudev to Shivarashi.

"Gurudev," Shivarashi spoke, doing his best to keep his voice as natural as possible, "I assume we must take Ganga and the other dancing girls also,"

"Of course," said Gurudev. "What will they do here? Tell Ganga that they should be ready."

"Ganga will not leave this place under any circumstances," suddenly interjected Ganga, standing in the doorway with her hands on her waist. All the kings watched the scene without a word. "Gurudev, just as your place is at the feet of Lord Somanath, so is my place at your feet. Do you understand?"

Sarvagna smiled and said: "Ganga, but this is not the place for women. You will have to go."

"I know where my duty lies. If you have your duty, do you think we have none?" she said with dignity.

"But women have more to fear at the hands of the invaders than men," said Ra. "That is why thousands of women had to burn themselves alive."

"My life is at the feet of Gurudev. To court death, I won't need to jump into the fire."

Gurudev looked at Ganga and recognised the purity of the heart of this devoted woman.

"Very well, Vimal. Let her remain. And, Ganga, who is standing there behind you—Chaula? Send her away."

"Yes, she should be sent away," said Rashi. "This is not the place for a young woman."

"Chaula will go," agreed Ganga, turning towards her daughter.

There was something remarkable about the expression on Chaula's face as she stood there, her lips firmly closed,

her bright eyes wide open and her soft tender hand on her throat as if to coax the words out of her mouth.

She looked first at Ganga and then at Bheemdev, and then at Rashi.

"You will go, Chaula, will you not?" Gang Sarvagna asked with a smile.

Chaula looked as if in a daze. "All of you," at last her voice emerged from her throat, "have taken away my Lord from me. You have forbidden me to dance. There is nothing for me to live. You may as well kill me." She took one step forward, lost her balance and fell unconscious on the ground.

In that very moment the memory of that moonlit night came back to Bheemdev, when he had first seen her face and her body. His heart leaped and before anyone could realise what was happening, he stood up and lifted up Chaula in his arms. For a moment the war and the invader were forgotten. Very gently he put Chaula in Ganga's lap.

Gang Sarvagna smiled. "Where there is faith, there is no thought of life. Let everyone who has faith stay on. It is a sin to separate devotees from their Lord."

"Very well," said Bheemdev with irritation. "There seems to be some objection of principle against whatever I want to do. But, Gurudev, at least let me do a few things as I want."

"Yes, yes. I shall not say anything more," reassured

Gang as he burst out laughing. "Have I not already handed over my authority to you?"

* * *

The task was not as easy as Bheemdev had imagined. Damodar Mehta had managed to send eight ships. He had also sent a message that on the following day another eleven would come. A small vessel could at most carry 50 people, and a large one, 200. And there were ten to fifteen thousand people who had to be carried. The difficulties of transporting so many people were immense.

Bheemdev was not a man to give in easily to difficulties. He quickly decided who should be sent, who should go first, who should go afterwards, when and by what route. By evening the vessels were ready and the first group of people was sent aboard.

Separation from friends and relations was a tearful scene. Those who were to leave went up the ship trembling with the name of God upon their lips. Some kept singing hymns, others never tired of abusing Hammir. Those whose wives and children were going were inconsolable. There were many who were leaving Prabhas for the first time in several generations! All these difficulties and human problems were sorted out by Vimal.

Even more difficult was to make arrangements for billeting thirty thousand troops. Bheemdev busied himself personally in that task with the assistance of Shivarashi and Deepa, the treasurer of the temple. Private residences, public

dharmashalas and courtyards of small temples were requisitioned. Deepa was put in charge of the grain stocks in Prabhas itself as well as the stocks that were brought from Anhilwad. He opened distribution centres in different localities.

Bheemdev had other duties to attend to. Ra, Trilochanpal, and Bheemdev himself were all of the opinion that the Prabhas Fort and its moat were not in a satisfactory condition. They surveyed the entire area and decided upon the steps that needed to be taken immediately. Many citizens and soldiers were placed day and night on the work of repairing the fort and its moat. Every moment was precious, for Hammir was not far away.

Within a very short time, Prabhas presented the appearance of a busy anthill. Bheemdev provided the inspiration. On the foot or on horseback he went to every corner of the city with his chiefs, issuing orders in a continuous stream. Nothing escaped his vigilant eye. Whoever dared to disobey his orders received summary punishment. A naik who refused to dig the moat, immediately lost his right hand by one stroke of the sword. No one was left in any doubt that there was a leader in charge.

By the time Bheemdev had finished his supervision of every single activity, it was already midnight. He was satisfied that much of the work that had been set in motion would be completed by dawn. At last he went to the room allotted to him.

His personal attendant, Veera, was waiting for him and anticipating his master's needs, had water and food ready. Veera combined in himself many functions: he was valet, friend and mother to Bheemdev. He had played with Bheemdev and carried him on his shoulders when he was a child. When Bheemdev grew up, he taught him swordsmanship and archery. He first tasted Bheemdev's meals before serving them and every night he slept outside his master's door with a drawn sword. Bheemdev was so accustomed to Veera's service that he would go to sleep only after the man had massaged his body at night. Indeed, Veera for his part never went to sleep until Bheemdev had told him, however briefly, something of what he had done during the day.

Today, after Bheemdev had taken his bath and food, Veera said: "Bapu, now you may go to sleep. You will not be able to stand the strain at this pace unless you get some sleep."

"Until I chase Hammir out of this land I cannot allow myself to sleep," rejoined Bheemdev. As if to emphasise his reply, he started buckling on the sword at his waist.

"Bapu, do have a little rest. You have not rested since last night. This war is not going to end in a day!"

"Veera, this is not an ordinary war. Get ready to accompany me."

"But what is there that is so important?" asked Veera as he also began to arm himself.

“You have become old. What do you understand?” Bheemdev led the way downstairs. “Veera, from tomorrow Gurudev will occupy the suite opposite mine. Be careful how you behave.”

“Why does he give up his own residence to live here?”

“I will tell you why,” replied Bheemdev. “Many of his disciples will leave tomorrow. It is desirable that he should be here so that he can be available when I want to consult him.”

The soldier on guard duty at the entrance to the temple courtyard greeted them as they came down.

“This abode of the Lord has indeed begun to take on the appearance of a military camp,” whispered Bheemdev into Veera’s ears.

33.

SHIVARASHI MAKES A DECISION

AFTER Bheemdev and Veera had offered worship to Lord Somanath, they went to the quarters of the dancing women. Although it was late at night, there was great activity in many homes. This was because most of the dancing girls were getting ready to leave for Kambhayat (Cambay) on the following day. A few had expressed their desire to stay on, but Minister Vimal had not decided whether to allow even those few women to stay behind.

Bheemdev walked towards Ganga's quarters. The front doors were shut, but there was a small lamp burning in a room in the upper storey. He knocked at the door. Ganga called out immediately: "Who is it at this hour of the night?"

"It is I, Bheemdev. I have come to inquire after Chaula," he answered with authority. It was a different Bheemdev—Bheemdev the commander, not the diffident young man of two months ago.

"Bheemdev Maharaj!" exclaimed the startled Ganga involuntarily. She woke up Chaula and after lighting a brighter lamp, opened the door. "Welcome, Maharaj."

"Veera, come in and stand guard at the door," said Bheemdev and went up the stairs with Ganga.

"Chaula is all right now," said Ganga. "She is extremely sensitive. Little things upset her enormously, and when she is upset, she faints. That adds to my worries. Please sit down." She offered him a seat. "Chaula will be here in a moment; she is changing her clothes."

With a wildly beating heart, Chaula was watching Bheemdev through the half-closed door of her room. She could hear the temple drums beating. Her God had indeed responded to her prayers and had come in person to destroy the insolent Hammir. Even while such thoughts passed through her mind, her skilful fingers were engaged in changing her clothes. She finished dressing, but her feet refused to move.

Ganga called out to her: "Chaula, why are you taking so much time?" Chaula mustered sufficient courage to come out. Overcome with shyness, she could not raise her head.

"Come," said Ganga.

She came forward shyly, with astonishing grace, like a child fairy, leaving Bheemdev spellbound. She fell at his feet and placed the dust of his feet on her head.

"Chaula, you had asked me that evening to come back after destroying the enemies. I have not forgotten what you told me." Two grateful eyes looked up at Bheemdev and silently thanked him. "I have not forgotten you," he repeated.

"When you came into the temple today and ordered the dance to be stopped, did you know that it was I who

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was dancing, Maharaj?" There was a sweet rebuke in Chaula's voice.

"I am sorry, I did not see you. I have a single track mind. At that time, my only thought was to defend Prabhas," he laughed. "Now I see I was wrong. I permit you to offer worship for a little time every day. I had come only to tell you this."

"How can I ever thank you enough for saving me from that terrible *kapali*?" exclaimed Chaula.

"If a Kshatriya will not protect women, Brahmins and the cows, who else will?" replied Bheemdev.

Chaula looked at Bheemdev meaningfully. Her eyes said: "So you saved me because you were a Kshatriya?"

Bheemdev was deeply affected, but he realised that this was not the time for weakness. So, hardening his heart, he stood up. "I have still much work to do. I must go."

Ganga also stood up and replied: "Maharaj, please honour us with your visit sometimes."

Bheemdev could scarcely take himself away from the presence of Chaula whose beauty put even the most beautiful goddess in the shade.

"There will be hardly another woman in Prabhas after tomorrow," he said. "It will be best for both to be near where Gurudev and I are lodged. You will have to look after us, you know."

Ganga was delighted, but said simply: "As you command."

It seemed to Chaula that the whole world was dancing around her. Bheemdev felt he ought to give one more reason. "Tomorrow morning the other dancers' quarters will be occupied by my troops." And once again Chaula's eyes gently rebuked him: Where was the haste to give such a reason?

By midnight Shivarashi was thoroughly tired. He had given up his fast and had a heavy burden of work thrust on him. To add to his worry, he had to make a difficult decision whether to leave Prabhas or not.

Up to midday the problem had been simple: he had put in one scale his duty to serve Lord Somanath and his *Guru*; in the other, he put his desire to ensure the permanence of the Pashupat sect during the absence of his *guru*, coupled with the happiness of being in the company of Chaula, in whom the spirit of Goddess Tripurasundari had entered.

However, later in the day, the situation had changed. He had, as a man of righteousness, to take the correct decision. It was very difficult to decide.

If he himself were to remain in Prabhas and if he and his *guru* were both to die, the Pashupat sect would receive a major blow. If Chaula were to remain in Prabhas and he were to go to Cambay, the gods would continue to be angry, for the worship of Tripurasundari would then still remain incomplete.

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He kept revolving these thoughts in his mind until he arrived at the outer fort. He became sad at the sight of soldiers on guard duty in the sacred place with scarcely any devotee to be seen. If only he could complete the worship of Mahamaya, the invader would of a certainty be destroyed. How to achieve this was what worried him most.

He recognised Bheemdev and Veera as they were going up to their rooms. Bheemdev was undoubtedly a powerful and clever man. He had himself helped the forces that had helped Bheemdev to secure the throne of Anhilwad. If Hammir were defeated and Bheemdev became the King of Gujarat, his chances of rising to the position of Sarvagna would be greater.

Suddenly his chain of thoughts was broken by Bheemdev's words: "Veera, Chaula is a truly beautiful maiden. You will find that out for yourself when you see her tomorrow."

Chaula, a beautiful maiden! A maiden! Did not this miserable man of the world realise that Chaula was a part of Goddess Tripurasundari, and all this trouble had arisen only because Tripurasundari's worship had not been completed? He did not like the trace of sensuality in Bheemdev's words. Where was Chaula to meet Veera and how? At noon, Bheemdev had not even recognised her. What had happened in the intervening hours to make him talk about her like this? Was it true that Chaula and Bheemdev had met on an earlier occasion?

Bheemdev went down in Shivarashi's estimation. It was clear as crystal to him that the King was in some way insulting Goddess Mahamaya who had chosen to manifest Herself in Chaula.

Bheemdev and Veera went up to their rooms. Shivarashi stopped, as a sudden thought assailed him. So long as Goddess Mahamaya who had taken possession of Chaula's body was not appeased, the calamity which was about to descend upon Prabhas could not be staved off. To ward off that calamity would be the test of his own devoted worship and penance. He had found the answer to his question: he must remain in Prabhas.

34.

A MOMENT OF ECSTASY

IT was Thursday and full-moon night in the month of Paush. For the past six days, life for Chaula was one continuous and joyous dance. Not for a moment did she stop thinking of Bheemdev, the very incarnation of Lord Somanath in His Raudra aspect. To think of him, to serve, him, to wait on him, this had become the very breath of her life. Lord Shankar was getting ready to fight the demon Tripura; and she, Uma, the Consort of Lord Shankar, was there to serve him, to look to his comforts. She was happy as never before and as she had never hoped to be.

On the first floor of the inner fort, there were three wings surrounded by a balcony. On one of these, Bheemdev Maharaj had been billeted; in the middle, there was Gurudev, and in the third, Ganga, Chaula and two other dancing girls.

All men except Veera spent most of their time outside their quarters. This left the field open for Chaula to run from Gurudev's wing into Bheemdev's, skipping and singing. She would talk to Ganga joyously one moment, and in the other, make Veera tell her stories of Bheemdev's childhood. At

the end of each day, she listened with pride to what Bheemdev had done during the day. Sometimes she would climb up the top of the temple spire and watch the preparations for war—the new battlements, the moat being deepened and broadened, the serried ranks of archers, the soldiers in arms—and dance with joy and pride. Twice or thrice she had seen from her perch Bheemdev Maharaj himself when he went to inspect the town or the fort accompanied by his warriors. As she saw the tall and powerfully-built hero, giving commands, which men listened to with respect, her heart was filled with joy.

Every day, at least once, she danced before Lord Somanath. Nowadays there were no devotees in the temple; rarely did anyone come there to offer worship except those in charge of worship. Usually there would only be herself and her Lord, God. She sang to Him, fondly addressing words of endearment.

There was one small dark cloud in her blue sky of happiness. On many occasions, when she went out of the three wings, she came across Shivarashi or Hardatt or some other *sadhu*, respectfully bowing to her with folded hands from a distance, but each such encounter drove her back to her residence.

Each day Bheemdev became more and more occupied with the preparations. It was often midnight before he was able to get back to rest, bathe and eat. Sometimes she would serve his meal and converse with him for a while.

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Often, after the meal, Ra, Parmar or Chalukya King of Bhargukutchra (modern Broach) would come and discuss some strategy with him on the rear terrace. On such occasions, she would stand under the projection of the roof and watch. Only after Bheemdev had retired to his room would she go back to her mother and sleep.

On Wednesday, the 14th day of the moonlit fortnight, Bheemdev returned very late, and after dinner, went on the terrace for a stroll by himself. As usual, Chaula was standing a little away, watching him.

Bheemdev paced on the terrace with long strides, his head bowed in deep thought. Chaula felt like engaging him in conversation, but did not have the courage. Just as Bheemdev was about to return to his room, Chaula made a slight movement, trying to hide herself in the shadow of a pillar. The noise alerted Bheemdev, who at once put his hand on his sword and called out: "Who is there?"

"It is only I," said Chaula, as she came out of her hiding place, trembling.

"Chaula, why are you here at this time of the night?" Bheemdev's eyes shone like stars in the moonlight.

Chaula's heart beat fast. She replied in a voice which was barely audible: "Maharaj, do retire to bed. You will have to be up again early in the morning."

"Chaula, it is all the same to me whether I am awake or asleep." His voice was heavy with fatigue and sadness.

Chaula looked all around herself and came nearer. "Maharaj, I am your slave. Is there anything I can do to lighten your burden?"

Bheemdev was moved. Chaula with her bud-like lips and hopeful eyes, appeared particularly attractive in the moonlight. The memory of the one occasion when he had lifted this fairylike creature in his arms, came rushing back to his mind. That memory reawakened him and made his blood race in his veins.

"Chaula," said Bheemdev in a voice pulsating with emotion, "whenever I see you, my fatigue disappears. If you prove to be right and I succeed, you will have to come with me and share my burden."

More than the words, their implication overwhelmed Chaula. "Maharaj, when the battle is over, you may well forget me."

"Forget you!" exclaimed Bheemdev, as he put his strong hand on Chaula's shoulder, and with that touch, passion overwhelmed both. "No, never!" and he pulled her to himself and kissed her. Neither remembered how long the embrace and the kiss lasted. When they separated, all they could think of was that they had gone through an experience of supreme ecstasy. Emotion had so overpowered them both that neither was able to speak for several moments.

At last Chaula said: "Maharaj, has some new difficulty arisen? Why were you so grave?":

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"Chaula, we have received news today that Hammir is approaching fast, leaving in his wake a trail of devastation in Gujarat. He is plundering villages, killing cows and harassing women and Brahmins. While he is lying waste my country, I have to remain here, unable to protect those who have a claim on me."

"When, do you think, will he be here?"

"Perhaps tomorrow or the day after."

"Oh, well," said Chaula. "The sooner the trouble is faced and over, the better."

"Chaula, Lord Somanath is there to see that all will be well." But as he said this, Bheemdev's voice was again sad.

"Maharaj, you should go to bed. It is already very late. You must conserve your energy."

"Quite true," said Bheemdev, as he turned to go. He looked back once and was tempted to return to Chaula, but he forbore.

Chaula had disappeared as suddenly as she had appeared.

Veera Chavda, who had been a silent spectator, without either of them being aware of him, smiled happily to himself.

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THE SIEGE BEGINS

BHEEMDEV went to bed, but sleep eluded him at first, tired though he was. Eventually he fell into troubled sleep.

He dreamt of the fort walls rising steadily to greater heights; of huge monsters in the act of slaughtering Brahmins and cows; of fires raging all over the sacred town; and of universal destruction—while he lay helpless, unable to move his hands and feet.

A resplendent maiden suddenly appeared and admonished him with bright but reproachful eyes.

There was an unending procession of horses galloping and arrows being shot in such quick succession.

However, he lay in his bed, unable to move and the beautiful maiden was still there, reproaching. He felt suffocated and woke up with a start. He managed to gain control over himself, savoured the taste of that unforgettable kiss, and turned on his side to snatch some sleep.

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Once again, dreams troubled him. A new scene unfolded itself.

The young girl was dancing, and he was running. Around them elephants were running hither and thither, their tails up, and Gurudev was playing music. Suddenly, the girl stopped dancing and ran. He followed her, when they met the black-faced *kapali*.

Just at that moment, the moon came out in the sky and brightened the dark night and the *kapali* jumped into the river. He picked up the girl in his arms, and turned back. He came face to face with Gurudev playing on the drum and dancing...

The sound of the drums which were being played to awaken the troops shook him out of his troubled sleep. He immediately sat up and stretched his limbs. Usually there would be Veera standing at the foot of the bed, ready with his clothes and armour. Today when he reached out for them, there was no one.

He called out to Veera, but Veera was nowhere around. A shorter figure raised its hand and held out his clothes. Bheemdev was surprised. Where was Veera? Was he himself still dreaming? He lowered his hand and groping in the dark, he seized the hand holding out the clothes. The hand he seized was small, delicate and soft. A sound of gentle, musical laughter filled the room.

Bheemdev Maharaj was overwhelmed with emotion. He seized both the hands and pulled the figure to him. It

was Chaula. She let her head rest on his broad chest and she whispered: "My Lord, My Shambhu." In a dark corner of the room, Veera could ill-suppress his laughter

And then time stood still.

Bheemdev Maharaj emerged from his room to the sound of the drums. He seemed filled with rare joy and enthusiasm. His eyes were shining as they never had before and in his veins the blood surged vigorously. He was a little late for his meeting with Gurudev, Ra, Parmar, Chalukya, Kama Lakhani, his ministers and commanders. In the early dawn, he bounded up the steps of the fort and reached the top. In the distance, the surrounding darkness was pierced by bright red flames of fire, and black clouds of smoke rose to the skies. It was a clear sign that Hammir was approaching.

Bheemdev Maharaj was elated at the prospect of the imminent conflict. "There he comes," he bellowed joyfully. "Come along, Ra. Let's prepare our forces to face the enemy."

As the darkness vanished and the sky lighted up, he could see from the top of the fort small groups like black ants, emerging from the forest and rushing in the direction of Prabhas. First one, then two, then they multiplied into hundreds. As they came closer, he could discern that they were human beings, some on horseback, some in carts, and the strong morning breeze wafted their cries towards the fort.

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Ra was the first to speak.

"It looks as if these are our people who have escaped from Delwada."

"Bholanath, Thy will be done," murmured Gurudev.

"These refugees include a great many women and children," remarked minister Vimal.

"Oh, look at those poor people falling down!" exclaimed Gurudev. "May Shiva protect them."

"Delwada has fallen," said Bheemdev through closed lips. His voice was grave. His eyes roamed from the on-, rushing people to the horizon and back.

"Vimal," said Maharaj, "open the gates to the sea and take as many boats as we have into the creek. Bring in those who reach the shore alive."

"Chalukyaraj," remarked old Kama Lakhani, "what will you do with all these people inside the fort? We have food to last us barely two months."

"Lakhani, do you think that Hammir will last two months? Vimal, how many ships have we?"

"Three, Maharaj."

"Send away the women and children first on these ships."

"As you command," replied Vimal.

"Ra," continued Bheemdev, "let us get ready for battle. Station the archers on the fortress wall."

Ra blew his trumpet. This was echoed and the sound was carried further by other trumpets in every direction. By the time the sun had risen, the whole of Prabhas was ready for battle. Seven thousand archers were ready on the fortress wall to let off their arrows. At many points, camels were brought up to the top of the fort, carrying arms and colours for the fighting troops.

There were two hundred officers on horseback, all fully armed. The commanders watched the horizon.

Ganga and Chaula had climbed up to the balcony of a high turret of the temple. Chaula felt exhilarated at the sight of so many soldiers, officers and commanders, who were to be seen in every direction, each group carrying its particular colour. "Mother," she remarked, "look how magnificent our fort looks! Maharaj has certainly worked wonders within the short period of a week!"

On another—and the highest—balcony stood Gurudev with a number of rulers, surveying the scene and congratulating Bheemdev for the way the troops were marshalled. In the light of the sun, the fort of Prabhas stood out resplendent, powerful and impenetrable. Now vibrant with the movement of soldiers, the saffron-coloured flag of the Mighty Lord of Earth, Somanath, fluttered high above the fort and the temple, attracting the devotion of everybody in the world.

Maharaj Bheemdev took a deep breath. Conscious of his own strength, he drew out his sword and loudly

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proclaimed 'Victory unto Lord Somanath.' Thirty thousand soldiers responded to the echo: 'Victory unto Lord Somanath.' But even before the last echo had subsided, Bheemdev Maharaj opened his eyes wide and called out, "Ra, see what is happening along the seashore."

A large body of horsemen was rushing towards the fort. Parmar drew attention to the other side, "Look, what is happening here." Another body of cavalry was rushing towards the fort from the other side along the seashore.

"So they wish to block our road towards the sea?"

The first group was moving forward like a well-oiled machine. It had to cross the cremation ground, where the *Kalamukhas*—the *kapalis*—lived. Gurudev had persuaded them earnestly either to stay within the fort or migrate to Kambhayat, but so confident were they of their own strength, born of their strange and fearful rites and ways of living, that they ignored this advice. Never before had anyone dared come near them in any war. But they had reckoned without Hammir's soldiers, who were afraid of none from this world or the next! They cut down the Kalamukhas as a gardener would cut the grass. Gurudev had no sympathy for this sect. He exclaimed with a deep sigh: "Bholanath, Thy will be done."

Bheemdev Maharaj's eyes were strained in the direction of Delwada, and what he saw made him stand still. He saw coming a large force of horsemen, bearing bows and arrows.

“Ra, Parmar, you protect the road from the sea. I shall take care of these forces.”

Ra and Parmar left immediately to make appropriate arrangements. Hammir's army emerging from the forests of Delwada was surging forward like a raging, tearing river in flood. The horsemen were not in groups of five or fifty, but in numbers, in orderly and impenetrable formation. They wore shining headgear and battle-dress of leather and carried huge bows and arrows at the ready. They were followed by dozens of elephants, marching in step, like a magnificent and powerful mobile fort. The elephants were followed by large machines such as Bheemdev had never seen or imagined.

“Maharaj,” whispered Vimal, “Samant was right. This is not an army. It is a whole country on the attack!”

“But the Lord is with us!”

“Bheemdev, my son,” said Gurudev as he put his hand affectionately on his shoulder, “Bholanath has given you an opportunity to show your valour in a battle which even the Gods must envy.”

“And Gurudev, you will have an opportunity of seeing a battle, such as neither the Gods nor men would have ever seen.”

Meantime, the whole of Hammir's army had moved out of the forest and was rapidly surrounding the entire fortress like a river in flood. Their loud war cry

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"Allah-O-Akbar" shouted from a hundred thousand throats, cleft the air.

"Gurudev, wait here. I am going," and Bheemdev ran down the steps of the *shikhar* with Lakhani and Vimal, to the battlement on the main gate.

Hammir's cavalry halted on the other side of the moat. They still maintained their compact formation. Three sides of the fort were surrounded by troops standing erect, unmoving like statues. The archers had their arrows at the ready.

Except from the side of the sea, Prabhas was now in a state of siege. To the call of "Allah-O-Akbar," Bheemdev's troops gave a challenging answer: "Jaya Somanath."

36.

THE REVOLT OF THE WORSHIPPERS OF MAHAMAYA

WHILE Bheemdev Maharaj was engaged in studying the enemy positions from the special observation post on the fortress wall, Hammir's men erected a flagstaff in a small square in the centre made by his troops and a large green flag began flying proudly. Thousands of men soon busied themselves pitching tents behind the array of elephants.

Through the serried ranks of elephants, a passage was cleared. A large number of Hammir's warriors in battle formation came through it and formed themselves into a square. On its three sides stood rows of archers, and on the fourth a company of horsemen with drawn swords. Into this well-protected human fortress came fifteen horsemen, led by a powerful rider on an enormous black horse. He was heavy of build with powerful muscles and wore a large green turban. Samant's description was amazingly accurate: he was indeed the Sultan of Garjan.

Bheemdev gnashed his teeth as he took aim with his arrow. The hands of Gujarat's incomparable marksman were itching to release it.

Hammir advanced to the accompaniment of shouts of 'Allah-O-Akbar.' The Rajputs responded with 'Jaya Somanath.'

For a long time Hammir stared at Prabhas and then he asked his two expert archers to release their arrows. One arrow fell in the moat, the other fell short of it. The Rajput soldiers laughed in derision.

The impatient Masud rode forward and drew his bow. Bheemdev was ready; in a flash he pulled his bow with all his strength. The two arrows crossed each other. Masud's arrow hit the fortress wall and fell on the ground. Bheemdev's arrow brushed Masud's leg and pierced his horse's belly. The horse and rider fell and rolled in the dust. The Rajput warriors shouted exultantly: 'Jaya Somanath.'

Following Bheemdev's example, several Rajput soldiers also released their arrows, but none was able to reach the Hammir.

Hammir did not propose to engage in battle that day. His troops stood there silent and immobile for some time, until he issued orders of dismissal.

In Prabhas, trumpets were blown and drums were sounded to celebrate the fact that Bheemdev had drawn the first blood. By the afternoon it was clear that Hammir was

preparing for a siege which might last for months. His soldiers started building protective embankments in front of the cavalry and the archers.

The Rajput soldiers watched this activity from the fort walls and made fun of the invading troops.

Hardatt wandered like a mad man all over Prabhas. During fifty years this was the first time, when Tripurasundari's temple had been closed. He was not able to offer worship to Her; his right to worship had been taken away from him; not only so, but the Gurudev had stopped the offerings of wine and meat to the Goddess as also the orgiastic celebrations in that shrine. And—the crowning sacrilege — Gurudev himself began to offer worship to Tripurasundari in the way which he considered proper.

This made no difference to Hardatt so long as his Goddess was not worshipped in the accustomed manner; her shrine must be regarded as closed, imprisoning the goddess herself. Having been deprived of his life's interest he could do nothing but wander all day long, twirling his iron pincers.

It made him angrier that soldiers had taken possession of a number of other temples. He was horrified at this desecration in sacred Prabhas. Inevitably would Hammir destroy it; it was providential; the goddess meant it as a punishment for the sins of the *Guru*. Hardatt had no interest in who won or who lost. All he wanted was that his temple

should be re-opened and he be allowed to offer worship in the way he used to.

He met many other *sadhus* in the town who were equally dissatisfied. There were no pilgrims; the temple offerings on the old scale were banned. They discussed among themselves their mutual grievances and held Gurudev responsible for all their sufferings.

Hardatt and a few *sadhus* called upon Gurudev at his residence. Their posture indicated respect, but their language and tone smacked of discourtesy.

"Gurudev, so long as the temple of Mahamaya is not reopened, this calamity that is facing Prabhas will not end," said Hardatt, holding his pincers tightly in his hand. "From time immemorial it has never been closed." His eyes were like those of a wild animal.

"It is not closed," replied Gurudev, "I offer worship myself every day."

"But you do not allow us, the devotees of the Goddess, to see Her and to offer Her our worship."

"I had forbid this," replied Gurudev, "because of your own misdeeds."

"Gurudev," threatened Hardatt, "for fifty years no one took any objection to what I did. You did—and the result is Hammir. Mahamaya can never tolerate your stopping her traditional worship."

"Hardatt, I am fully familiar with the proper rituals prescribed by the Master, Lakulesh, and I have omitted no essential ritual," replied Gang Sarvagna firmly.

"Then why is Hammir here?" asked Hardatt.

"He has come because in the name of worshipping Gods in our temples we have followed many malpractices."

"So you will not reopen the temple?" asked a *sadhu*.

"No, not till Hammir is driven back."

"Then the anger of the Gods will be directed upon us," burst out some of the *sadhus* angrily.

"If the Gods are angry because of anything that I have done, I would pray to Lord Somanath to punish me alone and nobody else," quietly replied Gurudev.

"But this calamity will fall upon all of us," exclaimed Hardatt, furious at Gang Sarvagna's self-composure. It looked as if he might strike Gurudev any moment.

"Not by any deed of mine," said Gurudev quietly. "Lord Somanath has called me to the office of the *Guru* of the Pashupat cult for many years. I have never done anything improper, or against my duty. I will tell you, once and for all—until Bheemdev Maharaj drives back Hammir, the temple of Mahamaya will remain closed."

"There is nothing more to say. Permit us to leave," said Hardatt. He was getting angrier and he thought it best to go before he completely lost his self-control.

"You may go," replied Gurudev. The *sadhus* departed, casting angry glances at Gurudev.

Gurudev said to himself softly as he resumed his meditation: 'I wish I had agreed to send all these people away when Bheemdev Maharaj asked me to do so. Now we must face whatever happens. It shall be as Lord Somanath wills.'

After leaving Gang Sarvagna, Hardatt and the *sadhus* went straight to where Shivarashi was undergoing penance.

Shivarashi believed that Hammir had come because his penance was not severe enough. He was anxious that whatever was deficient in his penance should be made good as soon as possible. That was why he had begun this new exercise in meditation in which he concentrated on Goddess Parvati, the fountain of all strength and Lord Somanath, the repository of all that was good.

Hardatt and the *sadhus* sat near him in admiration until Shivarashi slowly came out of his meditation.

It was beyond their limited intelligence to understand the spiritual strength of Gurudev as also his wide and deep learning; but they could understand Rashiji, who had many of the qualities of the ordinary *sadhu*. Gurudev appeared to them cold and inaccessible like the peak of a snow-clad mountain, while Rashiji reminded them of a sacred temple, located on a tree-covered plateau. Rashiji loved penance and rituals of the Lakulesh sect as deeply as they did; besides

he was better able to understand their needs and grievances, and they, therefore, had had no hesitation in going to him with their troubles.

On emerging from his meditation, Shivarashi welcomed Hardatt and his companions.

“Rashiji,” Hardatt burst out without any prelude, in a sulky tone, “if the temple of Mahamaya is not reopened; we shall kill ourselves. We cannot put up any longer with Gurudev’s tyranny.”

“We must all carry out Gurudev’s orders implicitly,” was Rashi’s patient rejoinder.

“How can we live without the worship of Mahamaya?” asked Hardatt petulantly.

“Hardatt, you look at this matter with material eyes. With my spiritual vision, it seems clear that from the moment the temple was closed, Goddess Mahamaya left her temple abode and is now residing in the inner fortress. She gives vision to the truly worshipful; they can find her, even if she appears in a human body.”

“In whose human body?” asked Hardatt.

“Being on earth, Goddess Mahamaya lives within the four walls of a temple,” Shivarashi said avoiding a direct reply.

“What, then, has brought this visitation of Hammir?”

"This penance that I have undertaken for the last several days is precisely in order to find an answer to this riddle. Only now am I able to see the position clearly."

"And what is that?"

"That is a secret. But I hope to provide a proper solution," replied Shivarashi.

"Tell us. We too can find a way," persisted one of the *sadhus*.

"I shall tell you at the right time."

"No, please tell us now," insisted Hardatt. "Otherwise we will sit in front of the temple of Tripurasundari without food or drink until you tell us."

"Do you have no faith in me? You think you are the only ones who are devotees of Goddess Mahamaya?" asked Shivarashi.

"You are greatly devoted to Gurudev," replied Hardatt caustically.

"Quite true, but I am an even greater devotee of Goddess Mahamaya."

"You are certain that Goddess Mahamaya resides now in a human body. Chaula's?" asked Hardatt.

"Yes, if you have any doubt, you may go and see her when she dances late at night in front of Lord Somanath."

"Really?"

"Yes. Even Bheemdev Maharaj dare not come in the way of Goddess Mahamaya."

"Please explain to us clearly, Rashiji. We rely upon you. How can we send back Hammir? You know a great deal more than you tell us," said a *sadhu* beseechingly.

"That is why I am asking you to have faith in me."

"You may tell Hardatt what your remedy is. That will satisfy us. We may not be able to understand the course you have in mind and which you are not willing to tell us," the *sadhu* persisted with folded hands.

"Very well, I will tell Hardatt. You go outside and sit quietly. Mahamaya will set everything right."

All the *sadhus* except Hardatt immediately left the room.

"What is the remedy?" asked Hardatt.

"We must complete the worship which had been left unfinished on that day," whispered Shivarashi in Hardatt's ears — and the eyes of both men shone with a strange but frightening brilliance.

37.

A SACRILEGE

BHEEMDEV MAHARAJ was in great spirits. He had drawn first blood. He always prided himself on his skill in archery, and he had proved it.

The enemy's army was encamped in front of the fort, unable to decide on its future course. If Hammir was content merely to lay a siege, he could be defied for months. If he decided to attack, there were many ways to overcome him. Such were the thoughts that passed in Bheemdev's mind as he walked to and fro on the battlements of the fortress. Only Veera walked behind him.

When Bheemdev reached the gate leading to the sea, Ra Kama was watching the sea intently with one eye. His face looked grave. "Why, Ra, what are you looking at?"

"Do you see that in the distance?"

"What is that thing," asked Maharaj, fixing his eyes on the horizon, "which looks like a black cloud?"

"Yes," said Lakhani, "they are ships."

"I do not think so."

"I am from Kutch. Since childhood I have spent my life at sea. These are ships and they are coming in our direction. If they get here, we are doomed."

"Why?"

"Hammir has posted a strong force of cavalry along the seashore on either side of the fort, and if our ships are captured, the sea route will be blocked."

Once again Kama examined the horizon, and remarked "There are eight vessels."

"We must keep the sea-way open," said Bheemdev. "What shall we do?"

"There is only one way," said Kama, whose one and only eye kept opening and shutting rapidly. "We must see that the ships don't reach here."

"But what about the ships?" asked Bheemdev. "We shall have to send some good soldiers out to those ships so that if necessary they could fight."

Kama burst out laughing. "Maharaj, it means swimming a *kosa* out to sea. I am afraid you do not understand this kind of fighting," Kama replied, proud of his prowess as a skilled sailor. "There are a few good soldiers in my army who have sailed to Misr (Egypt) and even to Chin (China). I will get them ready for this venture."

"But do they know how to fight at sea?"

“For generations we have learnt how to fight at sea,” replied Kama.

“Who will lead them? I have one or two men from Kambhayat, but they are not much good.”

Kama closed his one eye before replying. “If I had a son, he could have undertaken this responsibility. Never mind, I was only seventy-two last Diwali. Who dares to say that I am old?” He laughed exposing his strong healthy teeth. “I’ll swim this distance in no time.”

“Well done, Ra, well done.”

“I’ll go and look for my men. By the time it is dark, have 2000 bowmen ready. Hammir’s arrows cannot reach us, but if he sends his horsemen after us to intercept our approach to the sea, we shall have a hard time. It will be up to you to save us from that disaster.”

“Don’t worry on that account. I’ll go and make necessary arrangements immediately,” was Bheemdev’s confident reply.

In complete secrecy, Bheemdev collected two thousand of his best marksmen near the gate leading to the sea. Soon after sunset, as darkness began to set in, he could see that a large number of little fires were lit in Hammir’s camp, around which the soldiers sat down to warm themselves. Bheemdev had ordered that no light or fire should be lit in the fort until later.

As soon as it was really dark, Kama Lakhani arrived at the gate with three hundred of his best swimmers. Bheemdev and minister Vimal were already there. Maharaj and Ra embraced each other with affection.

The brave Kama was fully armed with bow and arrow slung over his shoulders and his dagger fixed firmly in his waistband. Taking Lord Somanath's name, he slowly and noiselessly slid into the water. Not a bubble rose to the surface, not a sound was heard for a while.

Then a voice as of a water-hen reached those on the shore. That was the signal for the next Kutchi soldier to slip into the water; soon he too was invisible. One after another, those three hundred intrepid men slipped unobtrusively into the sea.

The whole operation was so skilfully carried out that none of Hammir's guards across the moat had even an inkling of what had happened. The last Kutchi warrior swam out at midnight, and then lights and fires were allowed to be lit inside the fort.

Kama had undertaken a very risky task. To swim about a *kosa* or more in the dark and then climb into those ships was an extremely difficult task. Though these vessels were from Kambhayat, he was not sure whether they belonged to some merchant or to the enemy.

For a long time, Bheemdev watched the sea impatiently. He was anxious to know what was happening. Several times

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he gave up hope. There was no sign of Kama having reached destination. Then with great sadness in his heart, Bheemdev decided to retire for the night. Just then, far away on the horizon, he saw many torches being waved up and down. Bheemdev jumped with joy, exclaiming "Well done, my Kama, well done!"

Immediately Hammir's troops on the seaward front came to life. Trumpets were blown. Horses neighed. On the fortress, archers stood ready for orders to shoot. At last the torches became invisible. For a little while silence prevailed throughout Hammir's camp. Bheemdev went back to his room with a light and happy heart.

* * *

When night fell, Shivarashi completed his prayers and took his bath. Then he went to the temple to offer worship to Lord Somanath. Returning home, he sat down to the meal prepared for him by Siddeshwar.

As a result of his meditation that day, he had discarded many of his misconceived ideas. He had no longer any doubt that Tripurasundari was moving about in the fort in the shape of Chaula. It was equally clear to him that so long as the interrupted ceremonial of Her worship was not completed, it would be impossible to defeat Hammir and the war would go on for ever! However, once the worship of Mahamaya was completed, the Goddess would leave Chaula's body, and, in accordance with age-old practice, he, as *Acharya*,

would be entitled to be the master of Chaula. This seemed to his mind inescapable.

To a saintly person who had conquered passion, anger and desire, this did not appear to be a matter of any great significance. His whole life had been a life of sacrifice. He was ready for any sacrifice in order to complete the worship of Tripurasundari. Indeed, it was his supreme duty to be ready for any sacrifice.

He walked slowly into the Lord's temple and sat down, hidden from the general gaze by a pillar. Only one small oil lamp was burning before Lord Somanath.

In a little while Chaula arrived, looking frightened and hesitant. She threw herself down before the Lord's feet. Then she began to dance in front of Him.

Shivarashi sat there, lost in admiration of the beauty and shapeliness of every part of her body. Verily, Chaula's incredible beauty could not be hers; it was that of Goddess Mahamaya. The memory of that half-completed worship came back to his mind, and it made him tremble in every limb of his body.

He was confirmed in his determination to see that Mahamaya's worship should be completed. The dance was soon over.

In simple and persuasive childlike words, Chaula sought to please her Lord Somanath. Rashiji was tempted to

complete the worship of Mahamaya there and then, but he controlled himself, realising that it could not be complete without the proper ritual!

Chaula soon went back to her room. Shivarashi followed her. His mind was absorbed in plans for determining the time and the manner in which the worship should be completed. Even in that darkness, as he walked after Chaula, he silently worshipped the sound of every footfall of Tripurasundari.

Chaula swiftly went up to the terrace. It seemed as if her feet had acquired wings. Who else but Mahamaya would walk on winged feet?

Chaula turned towards Bheemdev's quarters. Shivarashi was astonished. He followed her, walking in the shadow of the wall. Surely, Goddess Mahamaya would not go anywhere without good reason. There was a man standing on the terrace in the dark. It was Bheemdev. Who else could have that magnificent body?

"Maharaj," whispered Chaula eagerly, "where are you?"

"Here am I, waiting for you," replied Bheemdev. Two forms embraced each other and soon became one. The sound of kissing could be heard distinctly in that dark, peaceful night.

Rashiji's anger was aroused; a veritable volcano erupted in his heart; it seemed to him that in front of his eyes sacrilege

was being committed. Bheemdev's lips had touched the lips of the great Goddess Mahamaya.

Calling upon the anger of the God of gods to be visited on the head of this wicked Chalukya, Shivarashi, the greatest among devotees, came back unseen to his room. That miserable sinner who had defiled Mahamaya, did not deserve to live for a moment more!

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THROUGH sheer force of habit, Shivarashi's feet led him towards his *Guru's* quarters. This was indeed a terrible thing that had happened. It laid everyone under its curse. No one could have imagined that such a grave sin would be committed in the sacred home of Lord Somanath. The sin must be washed away, even at the risk of one's life; penance must be performed. It was essential to keep intact and unsullied the purity of Goddess Mahamaya.

Suddenly Shivarashi stopped in his tracks. Why should he go to *Guruji*? He would simply laugh away the whole thing. He might even say that Chaula was nothing more than an ordinary dancing girl. His worldly eyes would fail to see Goddess Tripurasundari in her. It was he who had interfered with the performance of the traditional ceremonies in honour of the Goddess and had ordered that the doors of Her temple be closed.

The Sarvagna had fallen from his high estate. For years, he had been behaving like a householder—as if Ganga, a

mere dancer, was his wife and Chaula his daughter. He, Shivarashi, had been treating Sarvagna with respect out of a feeling of gratitude, and because of his learning and his devotion to Lord Somanath. But was it proper for him, Shivarashi, to recognise a person as his *guru* who had shown himself ready to ignore the sacred books, and even the practice of penance? In fact, the *guru* was just a weak and cowardly old man. It was really he, Shivarashi, who had been offering true *tapas*.

The old man had established Bheemdev on his throne in order to strengthen his own position as the *Guru*. And today, to retain that position, he was allowing Bheemdev to do whatever he liked. To pay homage to such a person, to obey him, Shivarashi felt, was to betray the Pashupat sect. He must now put an end to this *guru*-disciple relationship. In his righteous anger, he seized with trembling hand the *rudraksh* rosary which the *Guru* had given him since his childhood and pulled it hard till it broke. Now his *guru* was Lord Lakulesh—no one else. None but he had the right to the highest position and hereafter it would be his supreme duty to protect the Pashupat sect by the power of his penance.

Without seeing Sarvagna, Shivarashi turned back. His mind was now made up. He wrapped around himself his warm shawl and walked slowly backwards. The soldiers who were warming themselves around a fire saw him from a distance and were so awed by his long hair and fierce

eyes that they thought that it must be Lord Somanath Himself who had come to examine the preparations for defence. So fierce indeed was his appearance that the soldiers, whom even the large forces of Hammir had failed to quail, began to tremble! Some hid their faces inside their blankets; others prostrated themselves in obeisance; a few uttered the greeting: "I bow to thee, Oh Shiva!" with fear. The tall, dark, awesome figure, his fierce eyes lowered, soon disappeared from view.

Dadda Chalukya of Bhrigukutchra (modern Broach) accompanied by his staff-officer was at this very moment engaged in inspecting the arrangements inside the fort. It was his turn to do this and he took his duty seriously. He was about thirty-five years of age.

Dadda who lived a happy-go-lucky life carried out the orders of the Viceroy of Patan and enjoyed being a ruler in name.

With Hammir's invasion, he was asked by Bheemdev to join him with his army; he had no alternative but to comply, giving up his palatial comforts and his women.

Dadda had been assigned the task of guarding the fortress on this cold winter night with the two armies facing each other on either side of the fortress wall. Had he been his own master, he would have tried to return to his capital; but he was firmly in the grip of Bheemdev. He was so afraid of Bheemdev that he was unable to return and unwilling to remain. It was an ill moment, he glumly reflected, when his

grandfather had been placed on the throne by Bheemdev's grandfather.

From a distance, he saw Shivarashi walking in his direction. His heart began to beat fast. At first he thought that he was seeing the spirit of Lord Somanath! The next moment he wondered whether it was not Kalabhairav. His immediate instinct was to run away, but he restrained himself for fear of losing his reputation among the soldiers.

When Shivarashi came closer, he recognised him. Some three years earlier Rashiji had undertaken a pilgrimage to Bhrikukutch to bathe in the river Narmada. At that time, Dadda had often sat at Rashiji's feet and listened to his words of wisdom. Also it was because of Rashiji's blessings that a son was born to his wife, after presenting him with five daughters in succession. Dadda prostrated himself before Shivarashi, who blessed him warmly.

Dadda was glad to be in Rashiji's company on his round of inspection. "Rashiji," he enquired in a friendly conversational way, "when do you think we will be able to get rid of this miserable invader?"

Shivarashi gave no reply. For a while, the two walked silently. Dadda again asked: "*Guru Maharaj*, do tell me what do you think will be the outcome of all this".

Shivarashi fixed his fierce eyes on Dadda, which greatly unnerved him. "Outcome?"

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"Yes, Rashiji. You are able to foresee the future. What do you think will happen?"

Shivarashi looked up and stared at the horizon before replying: "Those who offend Goddess Mahamaya will die like dogs."

Dadda was delighted. "Hammir?" he sought confirmation.

Shivarashi stopped short and looked angrily at Dadda. Dadda stood before him with folded hands. "No," said Shivarashi softly. "Bheem."

Dadda stopped as if struck by lightning.

"The consort of Lord Somanath has cursed him." With these words Rashiji walked away with long strides. Dadda, motionless and speechless, looked feebly at the rapidly receding back of Rashiji.

* * *

Dadda did not have much time to think.

The day dawned. There appeared to be tremendous commotion and bustle in Hammir's camp. The trembling Dadda blew on his conch loudly. Immediately the sentries from every gate took up the call and sounded the warning note. Bheemdev woke with a start. Without sparing a glance at the hand on his pillow, slim and delicate as a lotus stem, he jumped out of bed and put on his armour. He blew on his conch and rushed towards the fortress gate. Ra also came up at the same moment, fully armed, and before long,

Parmar and Vimal also arrived. Everyone assembled on the parapet of the main gate where Bheemdev Maharaj had stationed himself.

There was indeed great activity in Hammir's camp. Orders were given in a loud voice in a language which no one in the fort could understand. Horses neighed and arms clanged. In the rear, close to the forest, where Hammir's tent had been pitched, the entire area was lit up by numerous torches. Like a giant machine set in motion, Hammir's soldiers formed ranks and assumed battle positions.

Bheemdev wasted no time in making his own dispositions. One row of archers was soon drawn up kneeling and ready to let off their arrows. Behind them was another row, standing, protected by their shields. Behind this row, was a row of armoured Rajput warriors.

Gurudev came up. Bheemdev bowed to him and was blessed in return. Gurudev then placed on the forehead of each of the assembled rulers the auspicious vermilion mark. The sound of "Jaya Somanath" soon rent the air.

Before long, the darkness gave way to morning light and Bheemdev was able to see clearly in all directions. The entire disposition of Hammir's troops had been transformed. On three sides there were two long rows of soldiers, each protected as it were by a large, oblong, shining shield—so large that only the eyes and holding the tip of the sword of each soldier were visible. Every soldier also carried a surf board.

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Behind these men were four to six rows of equestrian archers. They had thick leather shields. Their long, flowing beards covered their tunics. Their heads were protected by large helmets adorned with animal horns.

At one word of command, ten thousand arrows would be directed at Bheemdev's forces. Behind were closely serried ranks of elephants which formed a living fort. On the back of each elephant there were three or four archers, each of whom carried a ladder for scaling the fortress wall.

There was amazing discipline, marvellous organisation. Both Ra and Bheemdev watched this demonstration of strength and organisation with admiration. "Maharaj, if we win at all, it will be by the grace of God," softly whispered Ra.

"By the grace of God and the determination of Kshatriyas," amended Maharaj proudly. "We will never lose, for truth is on our side."

"Truth always triumphs," smilingly confirmed Gurudev, as he started to go down from the top of the fort.

In the distance, a bugle blew a strange tune. It was echoed by others. The Muslim troops parted to make way for Hammir, who emerged from his tent. Fifty horses carrying battle drums walked slowly on two sides of him and he was followed by twenty-five to thirty horsemen.

Hammir himself with his magnificent physique and long red beard was mounted on a black horse. He wore a green

turban. All around him were horsemen, bows at the ready, forming a semi-circle like the crescent of the moon.

The very sight of this enormous and powerful force served only to arouse in Bheemdev a desire to hit it hard. His blood began to course rapidly and his eyes became bloodshot with anger. He jumped on the horse Veera had kept ready for him and standing up in the stirrups, he surveyed the great warriors who were standing around him.

Then he spoke: "My own, Patan's and Lord Somanath's honour is in your hands. Brave warriors, now there stand open before us the gates of heaven. Each Kshatriya must destroy a thousand of the enemy force. Whoever takes a step backward is not a true Kshatriya."

Ra Ratnaditya was overwhelmed with a fierce emotion. He too jumped on his horse, drew out his sword and cried "Victory to Bheemdev Maharaj."

The other soldiers picked up the challenging call. Bheemdev Maharaj, satisfied, smiled and waving his sword shouted responding in a terrifying voice "Jaya Somanath." The entire army responded and the echo of the loudly proclaimed "Jaya Somanath" must have reached the ears of Hammir, for, it reverberated like a veritable thunderclap.

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SHIVARASHI DISOWNS HIS GURU

HAMMIR stroked his beard as he looked at the fortress. In his plan to conquer the world, he had attacked many such forts, but he had not encountered anything like this, a sacred place strongly defended. He had faced innumerable hardships, had fought many battles and undergone difficulties such as he had never before experienced. Now his own magnificent army was ready. Facing him was the small Kshatriya army determined to resist to the bitter end. For a moment he felt unhappy at the thought of destroying so many people, for, he had not the slightest doubt that just as he had put to the sword thousands of Rajput soldiers on his way to this fort, this army too would be destroyed.

With Allah and the Prophet on his side, why could not victory be won without bloodshed? The thought vanished as swiftly as it came.

He wanted to earn fame which should be recorded in history as incomparable. The destruction of Lord Somanath

was to be the climax to the golden record of his fame. This small army opposing him was merely an obstacle that stood between him and his cherished goal. Destruction of such forces of Kafirs was destined to enhance his fame. His eyes shone as he shouted: "Allah-O-Akbar".

The drummers echoed the cry on their drums. Immediately, the cry of "Allah-O-Akbar" from every throat rose in the air. Every battalion blew its own trumpets, and the whole army started forward like an enormous python.

Bheemdev watched from the top of the central parapet the slow march forward of the large mass of "human tortoises," men with their back covered by large rectangular boards. As he got down from his horse, he directed his archers not to shoot their arrows until the horsemen came near enough, and in any case, not to waste their arrows upon the "tortoises."

He then turned to Veera and said: "Find out where Vimal is and tell him to send men with stones up here. As soon as these tortoises jump into water, we have to sink them." Veera mounted Bheem's horse and rode away to look for Vimal Mantri.

Bheemdev pulled out an arrow from its quiver and commanded his archers: "You should shoot as soon as I let loose my arrow; but take care not to aim at the tortoises or at the horsemen, aim only at the horses." The tortoises moved forward on their hands and feet, followed by the horsemen

and the elephants. As soon as the horsemen came close enough for their arrows to reach their target, they released them and spurred their horses. The tortoises stood up and started running forward. All three operations took place simultaneously.

At that psychological moment, Bheemdev shot his arrow, and according to his instructions, his band of thousand archers followed suit. Hundreds of wounded enemy horses either fell to the ground or ran in various directions. Several of Bheemdev's archers too were wounded, but their colleagues kept up their pressure on Hammir's cavalymen, who found it difficult to protect their horses and keep them under control.

The advance of the elephants was checked by the fallen horses. Their riders were momentarily nonplussed, unable to decide whether to release their arrows or not. The tortoises had moved towards the moat without the protection of horsemen and elephants.

As soon as Hammir learnt of what had happened, he issued a succession of orders. Fresh cavalymen were sent forward speedily to protect the tortoises.

Both sides kept up continuous volleys of arrows. Bheemdev and his selected band of archers rarely missed their mark. The disabled horses left their riders unprotected, and immediately became targets of the archers of Gujarat. Bheemdev successfully selected the enemy commanders and

each of his arrows invariably found its mark. Even the elephants, which were standing some distance away, did not escape. By the time the tortoises came close to the moat, the gap between them and the elephants equipped with ladders had increased considerably.

One of Hammir's commanders realised what was happening. The ladders were transferred from the elephants to the horses. Several horsemen rode up despite the rain of the defenders' arrows and succeeded in passing on some ladders to the tortoises.

"Do not waste your arrows against these tortoises. Concentrate instead on the horsemen and archers," Bheemdev ordered again.

As Hammir's horsemen came nearer, they shot down some of Patan's archers. Nevertheless Bheemdev Maharaj's armoured archers threw themselves wholeheartedly into the conflict. These powerful warriors never failed to hit their targets. The tortoises, clasping their board in one hand and a ladder in the other, jumped into the moat.

"Vimal, Vimal!" shouted Bheemdev.

"Maharaj, I am here."

"Have you brought the stones?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Conserve your arrows. Don't waste them on these creeping creatures." He then handed over his own bow to

Veera and taking a large rock, aimed it with full force at one of the tortoises. It fell with a thud on his shield. The man let out a loud scream, sank into the water and was drowned.

Taking their cue from Bheemdev Maharaj, his soldiers also kept up a shower of rocks on the tortoises. For a long time, this fierce battle continued and the tortoises were hard put to keep afloat. Those who succeeded in evading the rocks, could not escape the arrows if they came too close to the moat wall.

On the fort wall too, many were wounded, some continued to shoot, despite their wounds; and a few even as they breathed their last, pushed a rock at a tortoise and destroyed him!

Bheemdev was here, there and everywhere: One moment, he would be on foot and at another, he would be on his horse. He ordered and encouraged his soldiers to attack the enemy in turn with arrows and stones. From time to time, he would call out "Victory to Somanath" to rouse everyone to fresh outbursts of energy. His saffron-coloured turban attracted the enemy's arrows but not one came near enough to wound him. His body was protected by an invulnerable armour. Around his waist was a bright yellow sash, from which was suspended his pearl-studded sword. Half a dozen men loaded with arrows ran behind him to replenish his fast dwindling quiver. He shot always with a sure hand. Whenever he shot, he found a target.

From the high balcony of the temple, Ganga and Chaula, clinging to each other, watched the movements of the saffron-coloured turban. From time to time exclamations like "There he goes" "Oh! Oh!" "Good heavens!" "Oh my Lord!" involuntarily escaped their lips. If the turban disappeared from sight, Chaula would hide her face in Ganga's arms and when she saw the turban bobbing up and down vigorously, her heart would burst with joy and her feet perform a silent dance. Her whole heart through her eyes was attached to that turban. Had that turban fallen, the heart would have been broken.

Gurudev had also been watching the magnificent bravery of Bheemdev Maharaj. Chaula bowed to him and asked: "Gurudev, is it not true that Maharaj is the reincarnation of Rudra?" Gurudev smiled as he replied: "Yes, my child, of course he is. Can there be any doubt?"

Gurudev went down to offer worship to Tripurasundari. There was peace in his heart. He had heard much of Bheemdev's bravery, but only today he had seen him in action. Never had he imagined that Bheemdev would be so wonderfully brave. Hammir's forces were far larger than he had expected. On the other hand, Bheemdev's strength was also far greater than he had estimated it to be. He was satisfied that the Lord was still looking after them.

When Gurudev arrived at Tripurasundari's temple, he was shocked to find that someone had broken open the

locks of the outer doors. He guessed this to be Hardatt's evil deed and he went inside to investigate. The doors of the inner temple were also open. It was evident that someone had deliberately defied him.

When he arrived at the entrance to the inner temple; he saw Shivarashi meditating in front of the idol. Near it, there were offerings of flesh and wine. Gurudev was astonished that his principal disciple should have ignored his orders in this blatant manner. It was something inconceivable. Had Shivarashi gone mad?

Gurudev made no observation. After a few moments, Shivarashi opened his eyes. He gave Gurudev a fierce and impertinent look. Sarvagna smiled sadly. How could he bring himself to upbraid someone who had carried out his orders all his life? Shivarashi's attitude bespoke either folly or mental illness. It deserved either pity or special care. Musing thus, Gurudev continued to look at him silently.

Shivarashi looked at Gurudev with impudence and spoke in an aggressive tone:

"What do you wish to say? Say it."

"I have nothing to say."

"I have broken these locks. I have offered worship to Tripurasundari."

"You have done well. You have saved me the trouble today," replied Gurudev softly.

This calmness infuriated Shivarashi. "Since yesterday, I have ceased to regard you as my *guru*."

"I had begun to realise for some time that I was not the right person to be the *guru* of a disciple like you."

"And from today," continued Shivarashi as he stood up, "I have assumed the position of the *Guru* of the Pashupat sect."

"You cannot assume *Guruhood* by force. That is something which is acquired by tradition and merit."

From behind, Siddeshwar had arrived with Hardatt and two other *sadhus*. They had been listening to this conversation between Gurudev and his erstwhile disciple attentively. On seeing them, Shivarashi felt encouraged to speak more boldly.

"You are not my *Guru*. I do not wish you to confer that position on me. You have fallen from grace. You have broken the principles of the Pashupat sect. You have stopped the worship of Mahamaya."

"Well?"

"You caused the temple of Mahamaya to be closed down. You had Her worship suspended. She in whom Mahamaya is incarnated, you have offered to that Bheem in order to satisfy your own ambition."

"What else?"

"By your permission that wicked man has polluted

Goddess Mahamaya and has desecrated this sacred place. Old man, you have no right to live a minute longer." Gurudev's continued silence enraged Shivarashi all the more. He looked fierce like the legendary Durvasa, about to curse someone.

"My son, the way you have been ranting shows clearly that I have no right to live any more. But so long as I am alive, no power in heaven or earth can take away the position I hold."

"You miserable old man, you lost your position as *guru* a long time ago for ever."

"I shall certainly lose that position the moment, like you, I become proud of my penances and arrogant of my knowledge."

"You have lost it already. You have lost it. I am the one to step into that position. Your rule is over," shouted Shivarashi.

"You fool! Even if I have lost it, the man who is entitled to it is not you, but Gaganrashi who is now in Kambhayat. Before he left, I made him my successor here in the presence of four rulers. I have also given him the sandals and the bow and arrow of Lord Lakulesh."

So, this old man had indeed deceived him. Shivarashi was stricken dumb. For a long time he could not utter a word.

Gurudev continued: "Shivarashi, the position of *Guru* of the sect of Pashupat is equivalent to the position of *Guru* of the whole world. Only he is fit to be appointed to it who has knowledge, who has acquired merit and devotion, who has offered long penance and who is devoted to God. It cannot be obtained by arrogance or by passion."

"Old man, I do not want your position. Your Bheemdev has incurred the wrath of Mahamaya. So far as you are concerned, death is hovering over your head."

"Maybe I shall die. Gaganrashi will protect the sect of Pashupat from men like you." With this remark Gurudev slowly went out of the temple of Tripurasundari.

Hardatt spat at Gurudev as he passed by him. Gurudev turned to him smilingly. "You wish to see me angry? You silly man. If I, your *Guru*, will not forgive foolish children like you, who will?" Gazing upon the errant Hardatt pityingly, Gurudev went out with a saddened heart. But Hardatt and the other *sadhus* were unimpressed and they started abusing Gurudev.

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AT the Junagadh Gate of the fort, the situation had become very serious.

The young Parmar of Abu had, as directed by Bheemdev, concentrated his attack on the enemy's horsemen. Unfortunately, he had few armour-clad soldiers, many of whom were knocked out by enemy arrows. He had not employed the tactics, so successfully used by Bheemdev of overwhelming the enemy soldiers with boulders hurled from above. The enemy was, therefore, able to advance as planned: the tortoises swam the moat; enemy horsemen kept the defending archers busy; the elephant riders had advanced under the protecting cover of arrows and handed over the ladders to the 'tortoises.' The efforts of the defenders proved of no avail against the well-protected tortoises.

The Parmar did his utmost to inspire his troops to fight valiantly. He himself fought bravely and so did his men. Many gave up their lives in the service of the Lord, but despite everything, the 'human tortoises' were able to swim

across the moat and start climbing up the walls with the help of the ladders.

The horsemen, their horses trained to swim, were able to follow the 'tortoises' into the moat while the archers mounted on the elephants attacked the defending forces and created havoc among them.

Fortunately, the enemy had concentrated the major portion of his forces on the main gate. The attention of Hammir and his commanders was concentrated only there. In the result the enemy failed to take full advantage of the favourable situation that had developed at the Junagadh Gate.

Parmar asked his trusted lieutenant to go forthwith and inform Bheemdev of the situation and to secure additional help, without which he did not think he would be able to defend the gate beyond midday.

Bheemdev Maharaj was fortunately in a position to help.

The situation at the Central Gate had stabilised itself and the pressure of the attack had begun to ease. The enemy was no longer causing serious damage to the defending forces. Some three hundred 'tortoises' had been trying their best to climb, but not one had been successful in putting up a ladder against the fortress wall. Fresh reinforcements whether of cavalry or of the 'tortoises' were slow in coming.

Bheemdev instructed Minister Vimal to look after the

Central Gate while he went to the assistance of Parmar at the Junagadh Gate. He decided to take half of his horsemen with him without the enemy knowing it. To deceive the enemy further, he put his saffron-coloured turban on Vimal's head.

Ra had been doing magnificently at the Dwarka Gate. By his own skill and by the bravery and the marksmanship of his men, he had been able to keep the enemy forces at bay.

On receiving Parmar's message, Bheemdev rushed to his assistance with three hundred of his men.

At the Junagadh Gate, the situation had steadily worsened. Some five hundred of the enemy horsemen had organised themselves into a living floating vessel. Some 'tortoises' had succeeded in climbing upon it and were placing their ladders against the fortress wall. The enemy's arrows were let off with such rapidity and skill that it was difficult to do anything much against them.

The 'tortoises' and the horsemen, ignoring the fierce exchange of arrows above them, built some rafts with pieces of wood and in a few moments succeeded in constructing a bridge across the moat.

Fresh batches of 'tortoises' arrived and began to clamber up the ladders. There was great rejoicing in the enemy camp, for not only were the 'tortoises' able to cross the moat, but the marksmen on the ground were able to shoot down archers on the fortress wall.

Parmar's bravery was incredible. He made many efforts to sink the floats, and single-handedly destroyed many 'tortoises.' But with his steadily weakening forces, he was not able to cope with the attack. Every few moments he would ask "Where is Bheemdev Maharaj?" He was determined to do everything possible to defend the position until help arrived. He killed a large number of 'tortoises' and horsemen, but with each one he killed, there followed four to take his place. At last, he seized a heavy club, and standing on the battlement, his armour dazzling in the midday sun, he smote down the 'tortoises' as they climbed up the ladders.

Parmar's bravery inspired his men to display even greater bravery. At the uppermost point on the gate, Parmar stationed himself surrounded by twenty-five armoured soldiers. He was fighting a desperate but losing battle.

A tall Caucasian soldier, protecting his body with a strong shield, had started to climb up the ladder. He was about to jump into the fort, when Parmar pounced on him and tried to fling him down. Three other 'tortoises' who had followed him tried to help him. Just then an arrow came from somewhere and hit Parmar in the neck.

At that very moment, Parmar closed on the Caucasian giant with a fearful cry of 'Maharaj' and pushed both the giant and himself away from the wall. In a moment, both he and the giant were in mid-air, and then in the water along with the ladder-load of 'tortoises.' From above, the archers

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slaughtered the defenceless 'tortoises.' Parmar succeeded at the cost of his own life in protecting the Junagadh Gate.

Parmar's soldiers were in despair. At that very moment Bheemdev and his archers arrived on the scene. He saw Parmar fall and take the 'tortoises' down with him. He saw the horses and the rafts, all jumbled up in the water. Parmar was Bheemdev's favourite pupil. He was more dear to him than a son and more trusted than a friend. Obedient to his wishes, he had left his father and mother and his newly married wife to join this battle. 'Bheemdev' was his only cry when he fell. He had fought the battle for the sake of Patan and his family deity.

In that moment, Bheemdev Maharaj could think of nothing else except the fate of a dearly beloved friend. He looked down and saw the wounded Parmar fighting like a lion all alone. "Courage, Parmar," shouted Bheemdev, and jumped into the moat at the spot where Parmar was facing the soldiers.

Everyone's heart stood still at this incredible piece of rashness. But the Patan archers were not afraid of death, when engaged in the service of their master. One after the other, twenty-five brave soldiers plunged into the moat after Bheemdev. The rest concentrated on preventing the archers on the elephants from doing any damage to those fighting in the water.

Below in the moat, there raged a fierce battle. Bheemdev Maharaj jumped just in time to cut down an

enemy soldier who was about to deliver a death blow to Parmar. Then he mounted a riderless horse which was struggling to swim. "Come on, Parmar, find a horse and follow me," shouted Bheemdev. But the wounded Parmar did not find it easy to find a horse.

The Muslim soldiers were perplexed. Every second a soldier dropped from up above, and engaged the enemy in hand to hand combat. Dagger and sword flashed vigorously. But the Patan soldiers were no more than twenty-five, while the enemy numbered many times more.

By this time Ra had arrived on the scene and was himself inspired by Bheemdev's incredible bravery and enterprise. He was a shrewd warrior and was aware that in a battle it was the unexpected attack which brought victory. He abandoned prudence, and calling upon his soldiers to follow him, he went down the steps of the fort to the gate and opened it. No one seemed to realise what he had done.

The archers behind the thick screen of arrows were not able to see. Ra Ratnaditya and his soldiers cut the ropes which tied the floats to the shore and killed or sank hundreds of men sitting on them. They then swam to the point where Bheemdev was fighting. "Jaya Somanath," shouted Ra. Bheemdev immediately responded "Jaya Somanath." Parmar also called out, though feebly, "Jaya Somanath."

For a short while, the battle raged fiercely. Ra and his men brought back Bheemdev to the gate. Parmar and seventeen of the Patan soldiers who were still alive, in a

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trice, were all in the fort. The Junagadh Gate was shut as quickly as it had been opened.

Bheemdev rested the head of the wounded Parmar on his lap and gave him water.

"Bheemdev Maharaj," Parmar feebly murmured as he fixed his eyes on Bheemdev.

Bheemdev embraced him and with tears in his eyes, said, "Parmar, you have acquired immortal fame today."

"Jaya Somanath, Maharaj," barely whispered Parmar. "Now let me take leave," and with that word he died.

Maharaj, lowering his head on Parmar's breast, sobbed loudly. From behind, Gurudev put his hand on his shoulder and said: "Maharaj, he has died doing his duty. We have still to do our duty. Wait, let me tie up your wounded hand."

"You are right, Gurudev," said Bheemdev and stood up. Leaving Parmar's dead body in Gurudev's care, he went straight up to the fort-wall.

41.

SHIVARASHI DEFIES GURUDEV

TAKING Veera with him, Bheemdev made a quick survey of the position. At the main gate the enemy had fallen back. The enemy's archers on the elephants were retreating slowly, while the cavalry archers were still exchanging arrows briskly with the archers of Patan.

After discussion with Vimal Mantri, and leaving him in charge, Bheemdev moved on to the Dwarka Gate. The moat and the sea met just opposite the gate. This made its protection easier. Here where the battle had almost died down, Ra stood in deep thought. Maharaj ran up to him and embraced him. "Well done Ra, today you saved my life."

"What have I done that has any special merit? In saving you, I have only done my duty," replied Ra Ratnaditya.

"You showed great courage in opening the gate. Anyone else in your place would have trembled in the shoes."

"That may be. But did I have the courage to jump into the water from such a tall fortress wall?" rejoined Ra smilingly. Once again the two brave friends embraced each other.

“Ra, why is the enemy taking things easy here?”

“That makes me wonder too. I think they are up to some mischief,” said Ra twisting his moustache. “I think that before it gets dark, we must post more men at this place.”

“I agree with you. I shall send you some more men right away.”

“Maharaj, you must be tired; whereas I am not. While everything is quiet at this moment, why not have a little rest? Who knows what the night may have in store for us?”

When Bheemdev Maharaj came down from the rampart, he found some *sadhus* collecting the dead bodies of the fallen warriors for cremating them. Gurudev was engaged in organising the nursing and care of the wounded warriors; he had found accommodation for them in the temples of the inner fortress.

The great Gang Sarvagna, whose feet were touched with reverence by powerful kings, was engaged at the moment, like any ordinary physician, in relieving the wounded of their pain. Deepo Kothari took on himself the task of feeding the men. Maharaj, who was glad to see all this activity, said encouraging words to everyone and moved on towards his own room.

Near the main temple, he ran into Hardatt, who halted in front of him, and waving his iron pincers, cried, “Death is hovering over your head, you desecrator of Mahamaya!” Bheemdev’s first reaction was to draw his sword, but when

he saw the *sadhu* was unarmed, he smiled and walked away, leaving Hardatt to go his way.

When Maharaj entered his room, he felt buoyant and full of vitality. He looked around himself expectantly. Veera was quick to guess what was in Bheemdev's mind. "Maharaj, this Chaula is a mad girl. You see that balcony. All day long, she stood there with her mother, and watched your exploits."

"Veera, if the whole world was mad, what would happen? I cannot forget how she once looked at me intently."

"Anyhow, so far as she is concerned, there exists no one but you."

Maharaj removed his armour, had his bath, took his food and then went to bed. Before he fell asleep, he heard the patter of feet like some frightened deer running. He opened his eyes and looked. Two pink-soled feet, a small shapely body in flying clothes, breathless flushed face, enclosed in loose hair. The lovely lips said, "Mother, Maharaj performed wonders today." Bheemdev smiled, as he said to himself: "The climax is yet to come."

Chaula saw Maharaj and was overwhelmed with bashfulness. She drew her saree around herself, and looking down, walked away smiling and shy. The tired Bheemdev turned over in his bed and went to sleep. He kept seeing in his dream those rosy feet, that breathless face and the ever beautiful welcoming eyes.

Maharaj must have slept for barely a couple of hours

when he was awakened by a loud commotion. He stood up immediately and seizing his weapons came out on to the terrace.

It was already dusk. Troops were marching towards their resting place, dancing, singing and shouting "Jaya Somanath." In the forefront was Gurudev, Ra and Dadda with torch-bearers around them. Vimal was running ahead of them all to give some good news. As Maharaj looked out from the terrace, he saw Ganga and Chaula standing beyond Gurudev's residence, bending forward to see the oncoming group of people.

"Vimal, what has happened?" asked Maharaj smilingly.

"The enemy is withdrawing."

"Really? Have they given up their offensive?"

"Offensive? On all three sides, the entire army has moved back half-a-mile. We have won."

Maharaj quickly dressed himself and came down to be greeted by the army: "Victory to Bheemdev Maharaj!" Maharaj prostrated himself before Gurudev and said: "Gurudev, your blessings constituted our strength."

"Son, may you live long. Today we must all ask Lord Bholanath's blessings. I am only his humble servant. Your bravery, however, will be immortal. Well done. Get up, my boy. Get up and embrace me." Gurudev, after embracing Maharaj, embraced Ra, Dadda and the generals in turn. All the while the crowd kept shouting "Jaya Somanath" and

“Victory to Bheemdev Maharaj.” In their happiness the soldiers danced and sang and played on musical instruments.

“Maharaj, it is time for the evening prayers. We must all go and thank the Lord Who confers all blessings and victories upon us.”

Everyone, laughing and jumping and making joyful noises, moved towards the hall of the temple. Gurudev offered the evening prayers. The entire assembly in a tired but delighted voice sang the prayer.

After completing the worship, Gurudev said, “Friends, I bless all of you warriors who have come here to protect the shrine of the Lord God. May you live a hundred years and be able always to destroy the enemy of our religion. And in discharging this duty, may you obtain fame in this world and heaven in the next. Maharaj, I hope that your renown will be untarnished for ever. And may your fame help other brave successors of yours in following the right course of action. May you live for a hundred years. Maharajadhiraja, Paramabhakta Shri Chalukya.” As he finished speaking, there reigned complete silence.

Suddenly from behind a dark pillar there came out a tall fearsome figure and stationed himself a little away from Gurudev. It was as if Lord Shankar Himself had made His appearance. Pointing his iron pincers towards Gurudev, he said in a loud and terrible voice: “You, betrayer of our faith, all this that you have done in your pride will be razed to the

ground. Bheemdev, desecrator of Mahamaya, you and your *Guru*, who is a disgrace to our faith, will both die. And dogs will roam about the place where you have lived your unholy lives, and vultures will fly over it." The voice was sombre, fierce and terrifying.

A thousand soldiers pulled out their swords to kill the speaker. Bheemdev pulled out his sword and Ra his dagger. Dadda, trembling, sat down covering his eyes with his hands. There was much commotion, until Gurudev came forward and with a compelling gesture restored quiet.

"My brave warriors, my disciple Shivarashi has lost his balance of mind under the strain of his penance and the preparations for battle. Forget what he has said. To forgive behoves the brave."

With these words he turned towards Shivarashi. The two men presented a striking contrast. Shivarashi was a terrifying figure, and with long hair and flowing robes, looked like Rudra, the god of destruction. Gurudev, on the other hand, with his flowing white hair and beard, was the veritable image of Lord Shambhu, the giver of all gifts. Both were dedicated. Shivarashi was enraged, fierce, while Gurudev was the image of all that was peaceful, benevolent and merciful. For a while, the *Guru* and his disciple looked at each other and then was heard Gurudev's voice, speaking like an affectionate mother. "Shivarashi, he who loses control over himself destroys himself. Come along. You are no longer master of yourself. You are not well."

Without saying a word Shivarashi ground his teeth and closed his lips. He tried to speak, but could not.

"Come, my son," said Gurudev affectionately. From Shivarashi's innermost soul there emerged an all-consuming flame. It almost choked his throat. His eyes were bloodred. He felt like slapping the familiar face of this old man, but his hand was incapable of carrying out his wish.

"Come, my son, come," repeated Gurudev almost as if he was mesmerising a snake. "Come on." His words carried the impress of authority.

Shivarashi made one more effort to resist, but it was difficult for him to ignore the habit of years, and the charm of Gurudev's quiet and affectionate voice. He looked around himself and at the armed soldiers standing around him, and then faced Gurudev.

"Come along," said Gurudev once again as he put his hand on Shivarashi's shoulder. Shivarashi went along with Gurudev like a lamb. The two passed out of sight in a few moments and the spell of silence was broken by Ra shouting: "Victory to Bheemdev Maharaj!" Everyone started speaking and shouting at once.

"My brave soldiers, we cannot afford to sit complacently, however happy we may be. First we must cremate our brave warriors who have died. Then you must take your meals, and rest, and be ready for instantaneous

action, Who can tell what dark schemes the enemy is brewing?"

The warriors went towards the Dwarka Gate to cremate their comrades. Three thousand and two hundred brave men had died. Fifteen hundred lay wounded. Everyone was proud of the fact that each warrior had accounted for five to seven of his foe.

Later that evening Bheemdev Maharaj and Ra once again made a survey of the fortress and saw to all arrangements. After everything had been put in readiness for the following day, they returned to their respective resting places.

"Maharaj," said Ra, "I will take a little rest and then report for duty. I suspect some deep game in this move of Hammir's in withdrawing his troops."

"Very well. If necessary, call me:" said Bheemdev Maharaj.

42.

HAPPY MOMENTS

BHEEMDEV went back to his camp in a highly delighted mood, his head buzzing with intoxicating heavenly music. He had shown unrivalled bravery; he had succeeded in pushing back the forces of Hammir; he had become the beloved of his troops and had gained immortal fame. Hereafter, doubtless, the name of the great warrior Bheem would be mentioned in the same breath as that of Bheem, the son of Kunti, among the greatest warriors of the world. He had earned a place for himself in heaven by the way he had put to use the great strength given to him by Lord Bholanath. And that sprightly young dancer, like the rippling waters of the stream coming gaily down the mountains, would be there to welcome him, her lily-white body impatient in every fibre.

His thoughts turned towards Chaula. She was known to be Gurudev's daughter and she herself believed that she was Goddess Parvati! She was indeed a wonderful girl. Her head seemed to be in the clouds. Worldly cares touched her not. Life was one long dance for her, full of ebullient joy as

when she danced in the temple; she floated over the crisis through which they were passing as effortlessly as the tiny moon-beam over stormy waves of the sea. In her laughter and tears, in her hopes and fears, there was only the joy of being alive in the best of all possible worlds.

Bheemdev had two queens, both of them beautiful, wise and loyal. They had lightened the daily routine of his life. Never by word or sign had they disregarded his slightest wish. They had made his life happy and enjoyable. But Chaula's touch gave him not merely happiness and joy, but more; it tinted the world in golden hue. He could not even dream of talking to her about worldly affairs, about problems of the family or intrigues of the royal court. She was made, he felt, of the light of the moon, of the fragrance of flowers, of the dancing waves of the sea. In her company, he could think only of the delight of journeying through flower-laden forests, or sailing on uncharted seas or climbing snowclad mountains. Every time he thought of her, he was infused with a fresh zest for life and immense strength.

Such were the thoughts which crowded his mind till he arrived at his quarters. He took off his armour, laid down his weapons, and took his meals. Later, he went out onto the terrace for a brief stroll. The moon had risen high up in the sky; all the din and noise of the battle had abated; and in every direction, peace reigned. Bheemdev walked and for a long time impatiently, hoping to listen for Chaula's footfall.

But how could he hear anything, when Chaula had hidden herself in a dark corner of the terrace and thence watched him with mischievous eyes as he grew more and more impatient!

All day long, her heart had been dancing. The balcony at the top of the temple was her haven. To her it was not Bheemdev, the ruler of Patan, who had entered the battle; it was Lord Somanath Himself who was fighting with the great demon Tripura. Gang Sarvagna was his Brahma, his bow was Vishnu, and his arrows were the Vedas, while his ornaments were Dhruva and other stars.

She saw the Lord of all Gods, Shiva, moving hither and thither, spreading terror among living creatures on earth. She heard the rishis, the ancient seers, flying in the heavens, singing praises to the Lord.

She knew everybody. Veera Chavda was the Lord's mount Nandi; Vimal Mehta was Ganapati. Ra Ratnaditya was Indra, the chief of the Gods; all around him were the *ganas* announcing His victory.

There in the skies, she felt, she, as His divine Spouse, the daughter of the Himalayas, waited for her Lord. He would soon come and take her away and, both then would travel triumphantly together through life.

There, before her, was spread out the army of Tripura. She had seen the demon in his green turban and red beard. She had seen her Lord draw his weapon, killing thousands of demons.

She had seen the Lord in His mood of anger. She had seen the entire defending force offering Him worship. In the end, Tripura, the demon, had been overcome. Indra and all other gods had then vied with each other in coming before Him and offering Him worship, delighted as they all were with the victory.

At that moment she saw the great Lord Shiva standing before her. His face was bright as the sun, nay, so splendid as of a thousand suns! His eyes were brilliant, and so were the ornaments he had put on; his matted lock was resplendent. So entranced was she at this picture that she murmured the oft-repeated verses of *Shiva-Purana*. The victorious Lord was waiting to greet her.

Bheemdev became very restless. Why had Chaula not come yet? He stamped his feet on the ground with impatience and listened attentively for her steps.

Chaula could contain her amusement no longer. She burst into laughter and went straight to the spot where she was hiding. He drew her out and picked her up in his arms, pressed her against his breast. Chaula found it difficult to control her laughter!

“Oh! Oh! You are crushing me!” she exclaimed at last.

“I do not care. Why did you keep me waiting so long?”

“But you had no eyes for me. I have been waiting long to welcome you.”

"Nonsense. I looked for you until my eyes were tired."

"Wait a moment, my Lord Somanath. I have brought sandalwood and flowers to offer worship to you. You have defeated the great demon Tripura. I must offer worship." She jumped out of Bheemdev's arms and brought a garland and put it on his neck.

"Chaula, this garland is not for me alone. It is for both of us." Bheemdev put the garland that Chaula had given him, around Chaula's neck. Both laughed delightedly.

"Lord, be pleased with us and bless us! Shall we always be happy and true as we are now—Parvati and Parmeshwar?" said Chaula. And she once again flew into Bheemdev's arms.

It was a wonderful night. The moon too was raining nectar. Chaula shut her eyes as she surrendered herself to her Lord. Never had she experienced such happiness. She was a dancer by birth. Her devotion had made her bold. She put both her arms around Bheemdev and taking off her feet from the ground, remained suspended. Bheemdev also entered the spirit of the game, and lifting her up bodily, he took her into his room and closed the doors.

Veera, who had been standing on guard with a naked sword at the top of the stairs, winked at the moon and smiled.

Ra's apprehensions were not unfounded. Bheemdev Maharaj had scarcely left when his sharp ears picked up

an unusual sound. From over the sea where his vision could not reach came the sound of many men jumping or diving into sea or swimming with a splash from surrounding boats.

In the faint light of the moon, he was not able to distinguish clearly, but he immediately despatched men to call his lieutenants who were in charge at different points on the fort. Swiftly and silently he got together a thousand archers. In the distance where the moon cast its pale light on the sea, a movement of human beings could be discerned. Some men could be seen gathered in the mango-grove near the place where the sea met the moat. No attack was possible at that hour of the day. Hammir's army had withdrawn far away from the moat. All this activity, Ra felt, must, therefore, have some other different object.

One of Ra Lakhani's ships could be seen slowly proceeding towards Prabhas. The object of the enemy gathered in the mango-grove may be to prevent the ship from coming to the shore or to seize it. Perhaps these men did not belong to the Muslim troops at all, but were Bheemdev's soldiers swimming in the moonlight.

It would not be wise for him to try and stop the vessel from coming in either by signalling with torches or by shouting. Ra thought over the situation for a while and then decided upon a bold strategy. He had among his forces two excellent swimmers both belonging to Veraval, called Khara and Nira. He sent for them and explained to them their task. They

were to swim out silently to the ship and give the captain a full account of what had happened that day and to warn him of the danger involved in attempting to come in.

Khara and Nira had barely swum five hundred yards, when Ra realised the true significance of the activity that was going on in the mango-grove. Enemy soldiers were dragging along the shore a whole chain of rafts quietly and surreptitiously.

Ra was not quite sure what his answer should be. If he were to let out his men to intercept this action, they would be killed before they got anywhere near the rafts. If the ship arrived while the enemy soldiers were still near the shore, its safety would be endangered; it might fall into the enemy's hands, which would be harmful to the defenders of Prabhas.

In the end, Ra decided that it would be best to wait until the enemy soldiers departed after positioning the rafts at the points they had decided upon.

By tying up hundreds of these rafts together they built a large bridge and brought it up to a point not too far from the mouth of the moat and yet safe from the arrows of Bheemdev's army.

The intention of the enemy seemed to be to pull the improvised bridge into the moat as soon as the battle was resumed. It would help their soldiers to scale the fortress walls with ease. The improvised bridge must be sunk, but how to do it was a problem which perplexed Ra.

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The incoming ship had stopped at some distance from the shore. The tide had begun to run out. Khara and Nira had evidently reached the ship in time and succeeded in preventing it from falling into the enemy's hands.

While Hammir's soldiers were engaged in tying up the improvised bridge to its posts, Ra heard a distant sound of oars. He peered in the direction from which the sound was coming, but could see nothing. The sound stopped before long. When the enemy soldiers departed after completing their task, Ra decided to act, come what may. He sent for fifty of his men who could swim well and arranged for them to be let down from the fort into the moat with instructions to sink the bridge.

But before the men could slide down the ropes into the moat, the unexpected happened. The bridge began to break into pieces and the rafts, separating from one another as if beckoned by some unseen power, drifted away with the outgoing tide into the sea.

Ra wondered whether he was dreaming or awake and he rubbed his eyes. When the rafts had disappeared far into the sea, there was a hue and cry in the mango-grove. Ra smiled to himself quietly, "Truly, without Lord Somanath's blessings, such a miracle could never happen!"

43.

**SAMANT CHAUHAN
RECEIVES A SHOCK**

THREE men came swimming right up to the gateway, and one of them called out: "Bapu." it was Khara's voice. He and his companions were immediately pulled out of water. "Who is this third person?" enquired Ra.

"Don't you recognise me? I am Samant Chauhan," answered the third man. Ra recognised his voice and immediately gave him a warm embrace. "You are Chauhanraj. Was it you who cut off the ropes of the improvised bridge?"

"Yes, what else was there to be done?" We were swimming towards the fort. I saw the rafts and I recognised their significance. These two men of yours and I swam close and cut the ropes which tied them to the shore," replied Samant somewhat bashfully.

"Chauhan, you have indeed saved the fort of Prabhas," remarked Ra joyfully. "I was wondering how to counter these new tactics. Well done!"

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"It is you who deserve the congratulations of us all. I have heard what happened today. Where is Bheemdev Maharaj?"

"He had been working at great pressure today and has only just retired. I would not like to disturb him now. But how did you come?"

"Ra, after all of you left Patan, *Guru Nandidutt* and I, together with five hundred men, whom you had placed at our disposal, stationed ourselves in the neighbouring forest. When Hammir arrived in Patan, he was surprised to find it deserted. He was unable to judge what this signified. We managed to spread in his army the story of Ghogha Bapa's ghost. That trick proved effective; Hammir left Patan and came straight to Somanath from there."

"And what happened to Patan?"

"Maharaj's brother Durlabhsen, who had been dethroned, arrived just as Hammir was leaving Patan. On his offering to surrender, Hammir installed him on the throne of Patan, and also gave him five hundred Rajput soldiers, with orders to look after Patan until his return."

"I understand. What happened then?"

"Our task then became simple. Durlabhsen was delighted at his being enthroned. The very day after Hammir left, a Brahmin called Nandidutt, claiming to have been frightened by Ghogha Bapa's ghost, arrived in Patan and surrendered himself to Durlabhsen. The following day, large

numbers of villagers from the surrounding villages sought shelter in Patan, again through fear of Ghogha Bapa's ghost. Patan's soldiers were terrified by the tales of the ghost, so much so that Maharaj Durlabhsen himself thought it wiser to close the gates of the fort."

Ra was vastly amused and asked for further information.

"On the third night, the old Brahmin Nandidutt claimed that he could see the ghost walking. The soldiers were frightened and locked themselves inside their homes. Nandidutt began a sacrificial fire in the temple of Chamundeshwar, close to the gate of the fort. The villagers gathered to witness the sacrificial *yagna*."

"What happened then?"

"At midnight, there was a loud knock at the main gate of the fort. Everybody was frightened. It looked as if Ghogha Bapa's ghost wanted to enter the fort. No one had the courage to tell the ghost to go away. The fort-keeper opened his gates, and Nandidutt welcomed the ghost. This was the signal for the villagers to transform themselves into armed soldiers and to proceed to take possession of the fort. The ghost announced throughout the city that Patan had been captured by Ghogha Bapa and no one except the dead was to remain within the fort area. Such Turkish soldiers as were there in the city were killed. Those Rajputs who resisted were killed too."

"What happened to Durlabhsen?"

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"He threw himself at the feet of Ghogha Bapa and swore by all that he held sacred that he would give up his ambition to rule over Patan. He and his close associates were driven out and left to fend for themselves in the surrounding forest."

"Well done, well done, Chauhan. What happened next?"

"Patan was entrusted to the care of Minister Lula Mehta and I started recruiting soldiers in the name of Bheemdev Maharaj. Mehtaji also brought the army from Kambhayat. The soldiers who had found shelter in the forest also returned to Patan. We also received aid from Ujjain. The troops there gave chase and caught up with Hammir's men, before they got to Somanath."

"Who led these troops?"

"Damodar Mehta. He was most reluctant to take the command but agreed in the end."

"But why did you not do it?"

"My father and my uncles fought against Hammir. It is not yet my turn to do so. I went on to Kambhayat."

"And now Ghogha Bapa has come here!" concluded Ra with a smile.

"Ghogha Bapa will always be found where there is bravery and honour," commented Samant sadly. "I have brought with me the things that you wanted. And there,"

pointing to the sea he said, "I met Ra Kama Lakhani. He has remained there while I have come here."

"Lord Somanath's blessings are still with us. Now we can show Hammir what the warriors of Gujarat are capable of."

"I must meet Maharaj without delay, for I must be back on my ship before dawn."

Once again Ra and Samant embraced each other and then Ra directed a soldier to show Maharaj's quarters to Samant.

As he approached the inner fort, the memory of what had happened there only a few days before was revived in Samant's mind. He saw the pillar where he had sat and wept. The face of Kundla came in front of his eyes and along with it, he again saw everything that had happened in Tripurasundari's temple. Thus, he saw once again the awe-inspiring way in which Mahamaya was being worshipped, and recollected the smile and the affection and the joyous spirit of that young dancer when she first entered! In his desert of life, the memory of this young girl's innocent face was like an oasis.

In the surrounding darkness and painful memories which was his life, the beautiful and gentle image of Chaula gave him the only ray of hope. When he arrived at Kambhayat, he had learnt that the temple dancers from Prabhas had been sent there. For a moment, he was happy at the thought

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of seeing Chaula again among them, but he was told by Gaganrashi that Ganga and Chaula had remained behind with Gurudev. Now that he had come to Prabhas, he was eager to go to Gurudev's quarters in the hope that he might see Chaula. But his first duty was to see Maharaj and give him the latest information.

The soldier who had accompanied him showed him the way to Bheemdev Maharaj's quarters. Veera Chavda who stood guard stopped him.

"I am Samant Chauhan. Are you not Veera? Is Maharaj awake?"

"Bapu, you!" exclaimed the startled Veera softly.

"Yes, I have just come by sea from Kambhayat. I swam across from the ship and I have to report to Maharaj. I must return immediately. Please let me in."

Veera held him: "No. I am afraid you cannot go in." Samant's expression hardened. "Why, haven't you heard what I said? I wish to speak to him on a matter of great importance."

"Wait, Bapu, please. I shall go in and apprise him of your wish. Maharaj is not alone."

"Who is there with him at this time?"

Veera's sly laughter startled Samant. He answered: "That dancing girl, Chaula."

The whole world came crashing around him. So

staggered was he that he had to put out a hand to seek the support of the wall; then he sat down on the steps and closed his eyes. His heart was breaking.

“Bapu, do wait, while I inform Maharaj about your arrival.”

“Veera, when did he retire?” Samant’s voice was feeble as that of a dying man!

“Just a little while ago.”

“Let him rest. Let him rest,” said Samant in a voice choked with tears.

For a long time Samant remained seated with his hand on his forehead, and unable to weep. There was no hope, no escape for him—not even death. He was destined to be alone—without family, without future, without solace, without help. He was dead, though alive. He laughed a hollow laugh. Lord Somanath had left nothing for him—nothing.

“Come up, Chauhanraj,” called out Veera from above. “Maharaj is waiting for you.”

Samant somehow stood up and stumbled upwards. At the top of the steps, Bheemdev stood with arms outstretched to welcome him. “Samant, my brave boy, come. Where are you coming from?”

Samant embraced Bheemdev Maharaj coldly.

“Is that Chauhan?” called out Chaula as she came out of the room. She welcomed him in the traditional manner of

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a sister welcoming a brother by touching his face with her bent fingers and then applying them to her eyes.

The trembling Chauhan could not bear the touch of Chaula's hands. He saw the brave Bheemdev, he saw how Chaula was fit to be his queen and he saw mutual adoration in their eyes. With some difficulty he suppressed a sob and bowing low, greeted them both with folded hands. "Maharaj, Chaula", he said, "you are both fortunate that you have found each other."

Sometimes in his day dreams, he often thought of regaining Ghogha Bapa's lost kingdom and of Chaula sitting by his side as his illustrious consort on the throne. As he bent his head, this thought flashed into his mind, but he killed it as soon as it arose.

"Samant, I see you and Chaula know each other," said Bheemdev.

"Maharaj, I have been a lone wanderer in this world, and in my lonely life, she has occupied the position of a devoted sister. May she always remain happy. My dear sister, I wish to speak to Maharaj. Will you leave us alone?"

Chaula went back into the room. Samant took Bheemdev to a corner of the terrace.

"Maharaj, time is short and I have much to tell you. I have told everything to Ra who will give you the details. Your word is law in Patan. Damodar Mehta is coming up behind Hammir with his forces. The armies from Marwar

and Ujjain will soon be here. From Kambhayat I have brought ships loaded with food and weapons."

"Wonderful, wonderful, my dear Samant. Well done."

"I must leave you immediately; but I shall come back tomorrow."

"Samant, you are not just a human being; you are a god."

"I expect you are right. I am not a human being. Had I been a human being, I should have died long ago, so much have I had to endure!"

"Do not talk like this. You are my right-hand man."

"There is one thing more I have to say," interrupted Samant sternly.

"And what is that?" Bheemdev took a step backwards in surprise. Samant was transformed in a moment into an angry young man, his hand on his dagger.

"Is your infatuation for Chaula momentary? Is she just a plaything for the night?" Samant hissed this question and the brave Bheemdev faltered.

"Why do you ask?"

"She is by birth and profession a temple dancer. What will be her position in the home of the king of Patan?"

Bheemdev fully understood the significance of this question and laughed. "Samant, your fear is unjust. Chaula is the delight of my heart. I can never forget her."

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"She is Gurudev's daughter and my foster-sister. And if it is not your intention to make her your queen, we must settle the matter immediately." As he said this, Samant held his dagger firmly against Bheemdev's breast. He looked very fierce and determined.

Bheemdev burst out laughing. "Chauhan, Chaula is lucky indeed to have such a brother as you. Do not worry. From the moment I saw her, I have looked upon her as my future queen. A woman who is well worth loving is worth taking as a wife."

Samant sheathed his dagger. "Maharaj, forgive me. I should not have doubted your intentions."

"Not at all. You are not my brother," said Bheemdev. "You are my wife's brother. As soon as this war is over, you shall be the person to give her away in marriage to me."

Samant's face again became stern. "Maharaj, she has already become your wife. Heaven knows what Lord Somanath's intentions are! Heaven knows what may happen tomorrow!"

Bheemdev remained silent for a moment in deep thought. "Samant, you are quite right. Veera, go and summon Ra, Vimal and Dadda, to Gurudev's place. There is no auspicious moment like this very moment. Chauhan, Chaula, we shall go straight to Gurudev. Our marriage shall be performed immediately."

As soon as the marriage ceremony was over, and

Gurudev had blessed the married couple, and while Ganga was still shedding tears of joy, Samant stood up and said: "Bheemdev Maharaj, please permit me to go. It will soon be dawn."

Bheemdev and Chaula accompanied him up to the door of Gurudev's chambers. "My brother, my dear brother, may God bring you soon," Chaula said a tearful farewell.

"Some day, my sister, if I am alive you must come to tie the *raksha* thread around my wrist. And if not" Samant paused for a sob, " remember me." Without turning back, Samant ran towards the Dwarka gate.

44.

SHIVARASHI DECIDES ON REVENGE

SHIVARASHI went along with Gurudev meekly up to his room. When Sarvagna was standing in front of him, it seemed to his inflamed imagination that it was not his *guru* but Lakulesh, the founder of the Pashupat cult, believed to be an incarnation of Lord Shiva, himself telling him to go with him.

He had received his reward for his penance! The founder of the Pashupat cult had come in person to take him out of this den of sinners! The great Goddess Mahamaya Tripurasundari was Herself leading the way, Her delicate rose-tinted feet dancing ahead joyfully. Out of the surrounding darkness, his *Guru* and his beloved Goddess were taking him from darkness into light.

For a long time after Gurudev had left, Shivarashi stood rooted to the spot, peering into the darkness! Not until Siddheshwar came in and coughed to draw his attention, did he come back to earth. He remarked in a gentle, inspired voice: "Siddheshwar, Lord God had just been here to see me."

Siddheshwar was astounded. "Why have you begun to look upon Sarvagna once again as God?"

"No, no, Lord Lakulesh Himself was here."

"Lord Lakulesh?"

"Yes. Just this moment. He revealed Himself to me in the form of Lord Shankar." Shivarashi added in a tone of deep respect: "The Lord himself told me that this entire shrine is cockpit of sin. He asked me to leave and go where not even their shadow could fall and establish a new shrine of Lord Somanath and Mahamaya Tripurasundari, and worship them as I have been accustomed to worship here."

Puzzled, and a little uncertain about Shivarashi's sanity, Siddheshwar stared at him. He could not understand what had led to the tremendous transformation that had come over Rashiji's personality during the last few days. He was no longer weak, no longer a puppet. He had acquired such self-confidence as could only be seen in a God.

"Gurudev," said Siddheshwar—who had on his own conferred upon Shivarashi the title of Gurudev from the very day that Shivarashi had announced that he had ceased to regard Sarvagna as his *Guru*—when I saw the size of Hammir's army, I realised that it was unwise to stay on here. If we were even now to request Gurudev—I mean Gang Sarvagna—he would arrange for us to go to Kambhayat. Rao Kamo has anchored his ships in mid-ocean and he would take us."

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Shivarashi roared like an angry lion at Siddheshwar: "Rather than accept any assistance from that sinner, I would rather stay on."

"But then, how shall we be able to go away?"

"I do not wish to run away. I wish only to comply with the orders of Lord Lakulesh. And Goddess Mahamaya Tripurasundari is sure to indicate to me what I should do. Where she goes, there I will go, and it will be my duty to protect the sect of Pashupat following Her instructions. Mahamaya! Goddess of the Earth!" Shivarashi shouted and stood motionless staring wide-eyed into the darkness. Beyond the pale of his tiny oil lamp, he saw Tripurasundari, inviting him with joyous eyes. She looked amazingly beautiful. Her small lotus-like feet supported Her delicate but beautifully formed body and Mahamaya was laughing! Her laughter was very similar to the laughter that filled his heart.

"Siddheshwar, I have received my orders. Mahamaya enjoins us what to do. Come. Let us leave this abode of sinners."

"But how can we go?" inquired Siddheshwar. He found it difficult to follow the working of his *Guru's* mind.

As if he had just woken up from a dream, Shivarashi looked agitatedly in every direction. Then, composing himself, he said, "Siddheshwar, go and fetch Dadda Chalukya."

"He is on duty guarding the Junagadh Gate."

"I know. But tell him that it is my desire that he should come here immediately."

Siddheshwar went off without further question. A short while later, Hardatt and another *Sadhu* arrived and after greeting Shivarashi in the usual respectful manner, said: "Gurudev, are you ready to come with us? All preparations have been completed for the worship of Tripurasundari. We are waiting only for you. As soon as you come, we shall bring Chaula."

. "Chaula, Mahamaya?"

"Yes."

"You fools. Are you blind? Of what use is it to complete the worship?" Shivarashi spoke angrily through clenched teeth. "What we have now to do is to leave this den of sinners and consecrate Tripurasundari in some other sacred place. That is the command of Lord Lakulesh and Goddess Mahamaya Herself is guiding me to that place."

"But where shall we go?"

"We must leave this desecrated place immediately. Are you prepared to come? Tomorrow everyone who remains here will be burnt to ashes."

"We'll come, but how?"

"Mahamaya will show the way. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Very well then, go and fetch Chaula," he ordered,

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"but see to it that no one finds out what you are doing. We shall leave Prabhas at once."

Hardatt and his companion left immediately to comply with the orders of their *Guru* who to them looked as powerful as Lord Shankar Himself.

Shivarashi had eyes for no one but Tripurasundari in the shape of Chaula. She seemed to be in front of him, pointing out to him a new country beyond the mountain tops and the sea, where new temples of the sect were to be established, and where would grow the new place of pilgrimage.

The earth assumed a new garb. The rays of the sun formed a golden mountain on which there stood Tripurasundari in the form of Mahamaya. And down in the valley, was he himself playing the role of Jagadguru!

Shivarashi was waiting impatiently for Siddheshwar's return. "I could not find Dadda Chalukya. They have all gone to Gurudev's quarters."

"Then wait outside. When you see him coming, bring him here."

After a while, Hardatt and his companion arrived. Both were greatly agitated. "Oh, Gurudev, something terrible has happened."

"What?"

"Gurudev, Gang Sarvagna has given away Chaula in marriage to Bheemdev."

"Are you sure?" roared Shivarashi.

"They have just been married. I saw the marriage ceremony from the terrace."

Shivarashi's face was convulsed with anger. His eyes popped out. He tore his hair with both his hands. He lost his self-control and his sense of his own high status. Chaula, his Tripurasundari, had now become the wedded wife of Bheemdev of Patan! The thought of taking revenge seized him.

"Gurudev, what do we do next? Shall we leave or not?" persisted Hardatt.

"How can we, until all these sinners are burnt to ashes? You may go now. I shall call you when necessary." The two *sadhus*, intimidated by Shivarashi's fierce eyes, quickly went away.

Soon afterwards, Siddheshwar and Dadda Chalukya arrived and they were petrified by Shivarashi's terrifying mien.

"Dadda, you will have to carry out an order of mine."

"Most willingly."

"I want you to let Siddheshwar out of the fort somehow."

"You mean me?" queried Siddheshwar, unable to follow the working of his *Guru's* changed mind.

"Yes, you." Rashiji spoke so angrily that Siddheshwar dared not utter one further word of protest.

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"But, Gurudev, how can I do this?" remonstrated Dadda. "If Maharaj comes to know of it, he will kill me."

"Dadda, a son was born to you by my blessings. I can take him away with my curse. Will you do as I say?"

Dadda was frightened. How could he refuse this terrible *Sadhu*? "Very well, send him in a few minutes to the Dwarka gate. I shall make the arrangements."

Dadda had been told by Ra about the way Samant entered the Fort, and thought he could let Siddheshwar out in the same way. Without waiting for a moment, he left.

When Shivarashi told Siddheshwar what he had to do, he became apprehensive, but he could not resist the temptation of escaping from Prabhas which had now become a death-trap. By the time Siddheshwar arrived at the Dwarka gate, Khara and Nira had already let Samant down into the sea. Besides Dadda and the two sailors, there was no one else. Dadda told Khara that Maharaj had desired that Siddheshwar should also be allowed to go out along with Chauhan. "As you wish," said Khara and promptly let Siddheshwar down by a rope into the sea.

45.

BATTLE OF THE GATES

BY the time it was dawn, the Rajput forces in the fort were ready for the enemy. But there was no indication of any movement on the part of Hammir's forces. There were only a few enemy troops facing the Dwarka and Junagadh Gates, and no danger was expected from them. The main concentration of the enemy forces was opposite the main gate, but what form their attack might take, it was difficult to foresee. Bheemdev Maharaj ordered that all the forces that could be spared should assemble at the main gate.

As on the previous day, Hammir came out from his camp and inspected his forces before issuing the day's battle orders. Amidst the beating of drums and blowing of bugles; two battalions of cavalry, widely separated, marched towards the moat. At another command, hundreds of soldiers ran towards the moat outside the main gate, carrying with them an improvised bridge of six long beams. These men were accompanied by many others carrying carpenter's tools. Immediately, the battalions of cavalry surrounded them to

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give them cover. The enemy's intention clearly was to construct a bridge across the moat.

One group of Bheemdev's archers harassed the cavalry, while another did its best to decimate the soldiers and carpenters. The entire area reverberated with shouts of 'Allah-O-Akbar' and 'Jaya Somanath.'

This offensive of the enemy was by no means negligible. When one set of men died or were wounded, they were promptly replaced by others. Dead or wounded horses were replaced by others. The Rajput arrows were doing great damage. More and more fresh troops had to be brought in over the bodies of their fallen comrades.

Bheemdev Maharaj and Ra thought of another stratagem to frustrate this attempt at overwhelming the central gate. With the help of their elephants, they arranged for large boulders to be pushed and placed behind the gate as buttress. Some large boulders were rolled down the enemy troops trying to storm the gates, crushing and killing them. The arrows shot by both sides formed an umbrella, beneath which Hammir's forces continued their efforts to build the bridge and Bheemdev's soldiers to destroy it. Hundreds of Rajputs and Muslims perished in the attempt.

Hammir spared neither men nor animals in his desperate onslaught. Heaps of corpses began to be collected in the moat or on its margin. By midday, despite the fierceness of the battle, Hammir's men managed to complete the bridge and join it to the gate with an iron chain. On the inner side,

the main gate was so strongly buttressed with boulders that it would not shake if rammed, and not give way if it could be shaken. Stones ripped from houses, verandahs and temples were piled thick against the doors. Both the sides were exerting gigantic efforts.

Soon six of Hammir's elephants, holding a large beam in their trunks, rammed it against the centre gate. The doors shook, but did not break. The Rajput forces shouted 'Jaya Somanath' in their delight.

But Bheemdev Maharaj was worried. How long could the great gate withstand so much force and how was it possible to destroy the enemy's powerful elephants, each of which was protected by a closely-woven iron mesh? Maharaj and Ra held a consultation. A strategy must be found to snatch victory from sure defeat.

A hundred volunteers became ready and Ra was ready to plunge too, but Gurudev held him back. This was only the second day of the battle. Why should he endanger his life?

One of the wounded elephants of the enemy trying to force the gate open, was replaced by another; two more were added; now the weight of the eight tuskers tried to force the gate open. The bridge shook under their weight. The battering ram hit the gate with a shattering force. The bodies of the elephants were so completely protected by armour that the Rajput arrows made not the slightest impression on them.

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The gate withstood this powerful attack. Hammir's elephants backed. All the time, each side succeeded in wounding or killing hundreds of soldiers. Ra himself was wounded, and so was Vimal Mantri. Only Maharaj who was here, there and everywhere, was unharmed as if protected by Lord Somanath.

Only a few soldiers were guarding the Dwarka Gate while, opposing the Junagadh Gate were only a few 'tortoises' and cavalrymen. Dadda Solanki looked after its defence with a force which seemed adequate.

For the third time, two of the wounded elephants were replaced. Eight elephants carrying the heavy beam rushed forward to batter the main gate. The first elephant had just placed its foot upon the bridge when a loud shout came from the top of the fort. A rain of burning wood, soaked in oil and sulphur, fell upon the attacking elephants. The elephant in front startled both by the flame and smell of sulphur, pulled back; the elephant behind it could not stop in time; it pushed hard against the elephant in front, which lost its balance and toppled over on its side.

Taking advantage of the resulting confusion, fifty desperate men, with burning torches, jumped upon the bridge from above. Soon there was a fierce hand-to-hand battle on the bridge. The elephants, confused and frightened, screamed and retreated. The soldiers who were behind them, not realising what had happened, rode forward and made the situation more confused. Both sides were letting off a shower

of arrows and nobody knew what was happening. The Rajput volunteers cut the iron chains and set fire to the bridge. For a long time the battle raged fiercely. Bheemdev destroyed many, and wounded though he was, Ra never missed his mark. Vimal Mantri found a victim for each of his arrows.

Once again Hammir sent reinforcements to the bridge and once again fifty men jumped down from the fort. There was fierce hand-to-hand fight. The screams of the wounded and dying filled the air. The moat was filled with the bodies of the dead. For a while the fate of both armies hung in the balance.

Suddenly the situation cleared. The centre of the bridge caught fire. The chains snapped. The end which had been tied to the gate came away and sank into the water. Bheemdev shouted from the top of the fort 'Jaya Somanath' and a thousand throats echoed the victorious cry.

46.

TREACHERY

EARLY in the morning, Shivarashi entered the temple of Ganapati. His mind was neither on Lord Shankar nor on Lord Ganapati, but was concentrated on a stone close by the opposite wall.

With his mind's eye, he looked forward with fiendish delight to the destruction of Prabhas.

He saw Siddheshwar, his trusted disciple, who might one day succeed him plunging into the cold sea.

He saw him swimming away with powerful strokes; meeting a commanding officer of Hammir's army; ... he being taken to Hammir himself.

He was in a daze; in imagination, he saw Siddheshwar approaching Hammir as his proud ambassador ... he saw Hammir bend down to touch the feet of the representative of the powerful saint Shivarashi. .. he heard Siddheshwar demand assurances, and the terrified Hammir giving them... finally, Siddheshwar showing Hammir the secret passages

close by the temple of Sankateshwar Mahadev which led into the fort.

Shivarashi laughed loud and fanatically as he thought of the stupidity and shortsightedness of Bheemdev and his Gurudev.

Only last week they had had the mouth of the passage filled up and closed so that no one could come in from outside.

Gurudev had forgotten that on the day that he, Shivarashi, had been nominated by him as his successor, he had informed him of this secret route! Only the two knew of this route—Gang and himself. Gang had had that tunnel closed, but he, Shivarashi, had had it opened! ... Gang had destroyed the Pashupat sect; he, Shivarashi, had saved it!

He laughed aloud, until his own laughter frightened him. And now—thought he—through that tunnel Hammir, like Kaalabhairav, the Destroyer, would come into Prabhas and destroy the home of impurity.

Arrogantly he thought of his strength... that hypocrite of a *Guru* and that fool who had married Chaula, they, together with their soldiers, the lives of all these, were in *his* hands. In one second, he would destroy these human insects just as easily as he could squash an insect between his two fingers.

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His impatience was increasing with every minute. Suppose Siddheshwar was drowned? Suppose he went to Gang and told him everything?

Even if that happened, that would not be the end. If Hammir did not come today, he alone would dig his way out and open the tunnel for Hammir. He was like Lord Somanath ready to destroy the world; his third eye was opening ... Prabhas would be burnt down totally. It would be impossible to find even the ashes of Bheem, who had desecrated Chaula. But he with his power would be able to find the ashes of Chaula, who had forsaken him and accepted that ordinary warrior.

Such thoughts tumbled one over another in his demented mind. They were, however, disturbed by loud shouts of 'Jaya Somanath' and his anger grew a hundredfold.

Soon it was midday; then the sun was about to set, but still there was no news. Suddenly, Shivarashi heard a knocking, a hollow sound below the spot on which he was seated. He ran to the stone on which earlier his attention had been fixed. He dug out the dust around it and tried in vain to lift it up. Like a demon he danced with fierce, malicious joy. Now at last Bheem, Chaula and Gang would be turned to ashes.

Someone was banging on the stone. One, two, three... with the fifth desperate heave the heavy stone fell aside. Shivarashi shouted like a wild animal. From the tunnel's mouth there emerged Siddheshwar's head. He did not look

in the least like the ambassador of a great *Guru*. He was covered with mud. Blood was oozing from scratches all over his body and his hair had cobwebs in them. He came out tottering with fatigue. Around his waist was an iron chain to which was tied a rope held by a dozen enemy soldiers, who followed him one after the other.

Shivarashi eagerly went forward to embrace his disciple, but Siddheshwar moved away angrily, and hissed with clenched teeth: "You wretch, why did you make me do this?" Tired and hungry and meek from the punishment that he had received at the hands of the enemy, he collapsed. Shivarashi felt only contempt; he did not want such a weak disciple!

Twelve enemy soldiers came into the room. Only one was a Muslim, the other eleven were Hindus. Hammir had considered only the Kafirs fit for work of this nature!

"Are you Shivarashi?" asked one of them roughly. Shivarashi looked at him astonished at his insulting tone. Another soldier seized him bodily and shook him: "Come on. Walk ahead and show us the way to the Junagadh Gate."

Shivarashi, though angry complied quietly, immersed in his thought: at last he would be even with Bheem, Chaula and Gang, and before evening Prabhas would be burnt to ashes.

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FROM the balcony of the temple steeple Gurudev, Ganga and Chaula watched with enthusiasm the thrilling battle that was raging between the 'Gods' and the '*Rakshasas*.'

Chaula could hardly contain her joy. She was Parvati, the spouse of Lord Somanath, the consort of Bheemdev, who was Lord himself. Her lord was out at the front, fighting. When he returned in the evening, she had a plan to welcome him with *kumkum* and flowers. Gurudev kept reciting *Shivakavach* silently, seeking the protection of Lord Shambhu. Ganga's happiness was complete. She had her *Guru*, she had Chaula and Chaula was married: there was nothing more that she now desired.

As soon as the bridge below was destroyed, the Rajput troops roared with joy. On the main gate, everybody was dancing, intoxicated with victory. Hammir's forces were confused and dismayed. They ran hither and thither, looking for more elephants to help build a new bridge. For the defenders, this was indeed a major victory.

Suddenly Gurudev's eyes turned towards the Junagadh Gate. "What is that mad man doing there?" he said and ran down. He saw Shivarashi remonstrating with Dadda Solanki. Something had happened suddenly, but what, no one knew or could understand. Its effect was immediate. Hammir's troops, opposite that gate and beyond the moat, suddenly became active. Drums were beaten and bugles blown. Hammir, who had until then been invisible, arrived on a charger.

Dadda lost precious moments arguing with Shivarashi. He delayed issuing the warning signal. Bheemdev saw from a distance the attack by Hammir's troops and immediately rode hard towards the Junagadh Gate. Ra also blew fiercely on his conch. Vimal blew his conch and archers from everywhere rushed towards the Junagadh Gate.

Chaula was terrified: "Mother, what has happened suddenly?" Ganga screamed and embraced her. Gurudev, normally the very image of stately dignity, was running at a speed which scarcely became a man of his age.

Looking down, Chaula exclaimed: "Look, Mother, there is a fight going on outside the Junagadh Gate. And see there. Those "tortoises" have plunged into the moat, and Maharaj has not yet arrived!"

Large numbers of "tortoises" were to be seen swimming across while from the opposite shore, archers were letting off arrows to protect them. Dadda's men were very few,

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but they were responding bravely. They were outnumbered, and their number was being rapidly reduced. It was too late by the time Dadda was able to get rid of Shivarashi and sound the warning signal.

Bheemdev, Ra and Vimal arrived with their soldiers. Dadda pulled his hair in frustration. He did not have even the strength left to draw his bow and arrow.

"Ba, Maharaj has reached the scene," shouted Chaula clapping her hands with joy.

Bheemdev's archers began to shoot their arrows. Five thousand enemy horsemen plunged into the moat followed by Hammir on his black horse. From every side, the invading forces were pressing hard against the Junagadh Gate.

The Rajput troops reached the gate. Bheemdev seized Dadda by the neck and flung him into the moat, shouting, "Traitor." Ra's men soon organised themselves to offer systematic resistance. Minister Vimal tried to bring together an adequate supply of boulders. Shouts of 'Jaya Somanath' and 'Allah-O-Akbar' followed each other. Chaula screamed.

Suddenly, as if by some magic hand, the doors of the Junagadh Gate were opened wide. The Rajput troops fighting from the top of the fort did not even realise what had happened. The "tortoises" quickly converted themselves into well-armed soldiers and entered the fort of Prabhas through the gate. Hammir and his men lowered their horses into the moat.

Maharaj cried: "Look after the inner fort. Vimal, take some soldiers forthwith and protect the inner fort.'

He rushed to stop the incoming Muslim army. Thousands of Rajput throats roared, "Protect the inner fort." Ra jumped down from the top of the fort shouting "Jaya Somanath" and a large number of Rajput soldiers followed him to arrest the swelling tide of the onrushing Hammir's soldiers.

A fierce and bloody battle raged in front of the Junagadh Gate with arms, swords, clubs and hand-to-hand fighting. The warriors of Gujarat performed incredible and unimaginable acts of bravery. Ra fought like a madman. For a while he even succeeded in pushing back the Muslim hordes.

Soon Hammir himself, accompanied by his fierce and gigantic horsemen of Middle Asia, rode in. The whole Muslim army was pressing hard and relentlessly and could not be stopped. Ra fought like a lion at one end, Bheemdev Maharaj at another. Both were, however, on foot and so were their soldiers while the enemy was on horseback!

Chaula had swooned in her mother's arms. Ganga, though conscious, was struck dumb through fear. She could not see Gurudev in the medley down below. All she could do was to pray to Lord Shankar.

Before plunging into the desperate fight at the Junagadh Gate, Bheemdev had ordered Vimal to close the inner

fortress. Vimal sought his permission to make arrangements to leave the fort from the rear gate and to escape on the ships waiting in the harbour. Bheemdev reacted strongly: "Vimal, I know how to die. I cannot retreat."

"But Patan?"

"Go, go and protect Lord Mahadev," ordered Bheemdev. Minister Vimal had no alternative but to comply. He took with himself as many soldiers as he could and closed the gates of the inner fort.

Ra and Bheemdev performed miracles of bravery. Ra's right arm was severed. With the help of a soldier, he managed to get up on a horse; and continued to fight with a dagger which he held in his left hand. He caused havoc among the Muslim troops, until giddiness overtook him from loss of blood and he could hardly see. At last, he was hit by an arrow. He fell off the horse and never got up again.

Gang Sarvagna set off at a run in order to contact Shivarashi: because he feared that his pupil was up to mischief. The previous evening, he had behaved like a mad man. Today all morning he had stayed alone in the temple of Ganapati: and now he was seen expostulating with Dadda. Clearly there was a deep motive in Shivarashi's behaviour.

By the time Gang Sarvagna arrived at the Junagadh Gate, he saw Shivarashi moving away and the gates open. He realised immediately that the end had come! He looked up beseechingly, his gaze on the temple steeple and

murmured: "Bholanath, so this is the end! What made you do this, Lord?" He immediately turned back. It was imperative that Ganga and Chaula should be prevented from falling into the hands of the Muslims. Their proper place was by the side of the deity. Threading through narrow streets and avoiding troops, he wound his way slowly to the gates of the inner fort.

He made futile efforts to find out the wishes of the Lord. There was humility in his heart. He was convinced of the futility of human endeavour. For forty years he had looked after Prabhas, taught the principles of the Pashupat cult and had made whole Bharat to fall at the feet of Lord Shankar. In one moment, everything had been destroyed.

His faith in God began to waver. But his devotion to Him came to his assistance. It was not for him to doubt; if such was the wish of Lord Shankar, so be it.

Where in the name of worshipping Tripurasundari, immorality was being encouraged, where in the name of worshipping Bhairav, terrible crimes were being committed, where even such a devout person as himself had been unable to put things right, where a man like Shivarashi was to be his successor, was there any meaning in allowing their no-longer-sacred place to exist and endure?

At long last, Gang Sarvagna felt he had understood why Lord Shankar wanted this to happen. With the fall of Prabhas, the evil rituals would disappear and what was more,

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their votaries would be destroyed. The worship of the Lord would revive in its true and purified form. He himself had been helpless in preventing wrong-doing, though he had seen it happen with his eyes; that was why at last Lord Shankar had decided to call him away. It was only a matter of minutes.

“Lord, are you also going to be destroyed at the hands of this infidel?” he cried out, “Tell me, Lord, why have you kept Your third eye, which destroyed the demon Tripurasur, closed? Are we not fit even for this little mercy?”

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SHADOW OVER THE SHRINE

WHEN Gang Sarvagna arrived at the gates of the inner fort, he found them closed. Was he to be denied a last vision of the Lord? He sat in the verandah of a neighbouring house. Through the half-closed doors, he heard the feeble voice of a wounded man calling out for water. He went in. Deepa Kothari was dying. "Kothari, my brother!" he cried out.

"Is that you, Gurudev? How fortunate am I that at this my last moment, you are with me. Give me water."

"Wait, I will fetch it."

As Gurudev poured it into his mouth, he asked where he had been wounded.

"When the battle was raging on the bridge, I was inside, bringing up the big stones," went on Kothari. "When I came in to see if food for the troops was being prepared, I saw Rashiji coming out of the temple of Ganapati, followed by some enemy soldiers. When I challenged them, one of them plunged his dagger into me and flung me on this road. I cannot live, yet death does not come."

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"Kothari, Lord Shankar is not pleased with us."

"Where is Bheemdev Maharaj?"

"No one knows. He must be fighting somewhere, unless he too is dead. Whatever the Lord wills will happen."

"But, Gurudev, why has all this happened?"

"Let us submit to Bholanath's will, Kothari. This world is in the process of destruction," Gurudev whispered to Kothari.

Kothari breathed his last in the arms of Gurudev, who gently closed his eyes and left the house. He now understood how the Muslims had managed to come in. He remembered the tunnel that passed under the temple of Maruti; if Shivarashi could let the Muslims through it, why could he himself not use it to go into the inner fort? He walked briskly to the courtyard, but found a fierce battle raging there.

The air was thick with the shouts and screams of Hammir's horsemen and the warriors of Gujarat locked in combat. By piling up large stones and idols on the terrace of the temple of Ganapati, the soldiers had built a barricade and behind its protection, they were destroying the enemies with their arrows. Thanks to the skill and bravery of these, few warriors, Hammir's men were unable to penetrate the gates of the inner fort.

Just then bugles sounded in another direction and the Muslim soldiers turned their horses towards it. Gurudev

crossed over to the temple of Ganapati, and was pleasantly surprised to hear a familiar voice asking him to come in.

"Who is it? Veera Chavda?" asked Gurudev. Immediately the door was opened and Gurudev taken inside. He found Veera in tears. "Gurudev, Gurudev, Maharaj is dead."

"You don't say!"

"He fought like a lion. He killed hundreds of Muslims. In the end ..." he could not continue and broke down, sobbing softly.

"Whatever Bholanath wishes, that alone will happen," said Gurudev, stifling a sob. "Where is Maharaj's body?"

"We were seven of us with him. Had our troops known that Maharaj had fallen, they would have been dismayed. We, therefore, brought him here and are doing our best to prevent the Muslim forces from forcing their entry. Not until all seven of us die, will the temple fall, and then it will not matter whose corpse is where!" ended Veera bitterly.

"Veera, Maharaj's body does not belong to us. It belongs to Chaula. Let me take it inside."

"How will you take him?"

"If we dig two feet or so behind this recess, we will find a tunnel which goes into the inner fort."

"Very well, wait." Veera told his companions to keep

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up their resistance, while he was engaged on this mission, and then proceeded to assist Gurudev. Within a few moments, they had cleared the entrance to the tunnel. "Veera, will you remain here?"

"Yes. When my master is gone, what is there left for me to do? I should like to go as soon as possible." He prostrated himself at Gurudev's feet and at Bheemdev's, wiped his eyes and ran up the terrace.

Gurudev was familiar with the tunnel. Carrying Bheemdev's body on his shoulders, he slowly entered the tunnel. Staggering under the heavy load, falling and rising, he at last managed to arrive inside the temple of Ganapati. The mouth of the tunnel was open.

He sat down to recover his breath and then began to examine Maharaj. Bheemdev's body had received many wounds, but his pulse was beating. Gurudev tore up Bheemdev's clothes to make bandages and tied up his wounds. Again he lifted him up on his shoulder, but before going in, he turned to see the desperate, back-to-the-wall fighting by the Gujarati heroes. What bravery, what devotion, what sense of honour, thought Gurudev and his heart swelled with pride.

The next moment, he heard a fierce laughter. Opposite him sat Shivarashi. "Well, did I not tell you that you would all die like dogs?" and he roared with laughter again.

“Rashi, where you were brought up, where you received your training, where you learnt your Vedas, where you worshipped your God—there you have brought the *Mlechha*—there you have had your friends and your *Guru* slain and your God desecrated. I can well understand why Bholanath would want to destroy the place you have defiled.” With this bitter comment, Gurudev went in, carrying Bheemdev on his shoulders.

As soon as Gurudev stepped into the inner fort, a new spirit filled him. In this familiar temple he lost his weakness and his humility. For forty years he had ruled here without question over the bodies and souls of human beings. Here he had received homage from rulers, small and big. Here he ruled as the pontiff, the source of the learning and devotion to Bharat. As the disciple of the divine Lord, Lakulesh, he had taught the world how to achieve ‘*Moksha*.’

Ganga saw him coming. Frightened and trembling, she and Chaula ran down to him. Chaula saw Bheemdev, believed him dead, and crying bitterly, flung herself on his body. Gurudev took a deep breath and stood erect, serene and dignified.

“Chaula,” said he, “the Lord’s wishes have turned out to be very different from our own. My child, do not weep. Prepare yourself. The fortress will soon be overwhelmed and the Muslims will soon be here. You are no longer Chaula, but the Queen of Patan. Lest any *Mlechha* touches you

while you are alive, it now becomes your first duty to immolate yourself."

Chaula looked at him with a crazy look on her face. Bheemdev had left and with him the lamp of her life was, also extinguished.

"When did Maharaj die?"

"There is still some life in him." After I make arrangements for you, I shall see whether he will live or not. Ganga, hurry up and prepare Chaula for the pyre. I shall have the firewood ready. She seems destined, alas, to be happy only in the next world. And Ganga, you too prepare yourself to die. You must not fall into the hands of the Muslims."

"Sarvagna, I do not need a funeral pyre to die. Do not worry about me."

Gurudev asked a frightened *sadhu* who was hiding there to go and collect firewood. Then, with his own hands he prepared the pyre. Ganga anointed Chaula with sandalwood paste.

Like an automaton, Chaula did whatever Gurudev told her to do. She went up to Lord Somanath and prostrated herself before Him. Then she came back to where Bheemdev was lying unconscious. She moved his hair which was matted with blood from his forehead and kept gazing at her hero's face.

She herself looked like a corpse. On her face, there was no trace of emotion and her eyes had become lustreless and glazed. She touched first Bheemdev's feet, and then prostrated herself before Ganga and Gurudev. Gurudev was now master of himself. Quietly he lit the fire.

Just then Minister Vimal ran in panting.

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THE THRICE-SACRED IMAGE

MINISTER Vimal too was injured.

“Gurudev,” he implored, “you must run away from here. The inner fortress will fall any moment. After that, it will not take long for everything to fall into the enemy’s hands.”

“I realise it. After I see Chaula mount the pyre, I will be ready to meet Hammir.”

“But what is this? Is Maharaj dead?” Vimal was startled to see Bheemdev stretched out on the ground.

“No. He is alive. But it is a matter of moments.”

Vimal pursed his lips. This was no time for weeping, he felt.

“But, Gurudev, why don’t you go away?”

“Did I not tell you from the beginning that where Bholanath is, there I will remain?”

Vimal sighed and bowing low, he rested his head on Bheemdev’s feet.

Samant came in running and out of breath. "Samant! My son! you are here at this time?" cried out Gurudev.

"I suspected that Prabhas had fallen; so I came running," replied Samant. "You must come with me. The way to the sea is still open and a boat is waiting for us. Hurry up."

"My son, your bravery is unbounded. Chaula, it is Lord Shambhu's desire that you shall not die. You go with Samant. Samant, take Maharaj also with you. If he lives, he will be able once again to install the Lord at Prabhas."

"All right, but hurry up, hurry! Vimal, where are you going?"

"My place is inside the fortress."

"No. Your place is with Bheemdev who will live," said Samant. "Even if he dies, no one should know that he is dead. In his name, we have to destroy Hammir. Without him, the strength of Gujarat will be broken. Come with me."

"Vimal," supported Gurudev, "what Samant says is true. So long as Maharaj and you are alive, Gujarat will rise again from the ashes. You may still be able to cope with Hammir. Go."

"But...." prostrated Vimal.

"No 'buts.' This is my command. You must go."

"But, Gurudev, you?"

"Never mind about me. Do not waste time. I'll remain here at the feet of my Lord."

Quickly Samant and Vimal lifted Bheemdev's inert body and taking Chaula with them, made their escape by the rear exit.

"Sarvagna, you have made arrangements for everyone else. What about me?" said Ganga.

"What about you?"

Ganga fell on her knees. "You are my life, my *Guru*, my God. I have always lived at your feet. I wish to die there."

Suddenly there could be heard sky-rending shouts of 'Allah-O-Akbar' from every direction.

"There is not much time to lose. I have only one request. You have not killed anybody in all your life, but if I am not able to die by my own hand, lord, you must kill me."

Sarvagna was filled with deep emotion. He saw on Ganga's face superb devotion and utter loyalty. He bent down, stroked Ganga's hair affectionately and placed his hand on her head to bless her: "Ganga, may you attain Kailas."

There was great commotion outside. The enemy was at the gates of the fortress and shouts of 'Allah-O-Akbar' came nearer and nearer. Ganga removed from her hair her comb of gold, checked its sharp points with her fingers, and

pushed them firmly into her throat. A wild scream issued from her mouth. The next moment she fell dead.

For several hours the orgy of destruction went on in Prabhas. Hardly anyone remained alive. Every house was plundered and many houses were set fire to. But in accordance with Hammir's orders, no one had entered the inner fortress. In the evening Hammir stepped inside its precincts and the few remaining Rajputs were put to the sword.

Hammir ordered that the gates of the sanctum inside the inner fortress be broken open. That was not an easy task, but the chain across the doors was snapped.

Hammir was surprised to find his way blocked by a *sadhu*. It was Shivarashi standing with outstretched hands.

"Wait, Hammir, it is I who brought you here," he proclaimed in a loud voice. That an unarmed mendicant should be standing between him and the achievement of his life's desire, made Hammir smile.

"Tilak, what is he saying?"

Tilak translated Shivarashi's reply. "Conqueror of the world, he says that it was he who showed our men the way to the tunnel and that he had been promised that his God and he would be protected. He is prepared to give whatever money you desire."

Hammir laughed uproaringly. "You *kafir*, Mohammed

does not sell idols. He is an idol-breaker." With these words, he hit Shivarashi hard with the flat of his sword and entered the sanctum.

For the soldiers accompanying Hammir, this was a big joke; they laughed loudly and looked down upon the unconscious Shivarashi contemptuously.

Hammir was amazed at what he saw. Although there was not any sign of a human being, all the lamps were lit and the hall was brilliant with the reflected light from the jewel-studded pillars. Hammir had seen many temples and had destroyed not a few, but he had never before seen anything as wonderful as this.

For a moment, he beheld the beautiful scene.

His eyes fell upon Gurudev Gang Sarvagna. In Prabhas, sanctified by the sacrifice of thousands of brave Rajputs, in that magnificent temple which had survived for centuries, sat Gurudev, calmly carrying on worship of the Lord. The world may be destroyed, but for him there was only his Lord.

Hammir could not help being impressed by the powerful personality of this old man. He stood speechless, unable to utter a single word.

As soon as the worship was over, Gurudev placed the lamp on the ground and then stood barring the door of the sanctum sanctorum, his hands on his waist, towering in irresistible dignity.

Hammir hissed through his closed lips: "Old man, get out of my way." Gurudev understood his meaning from the gesture of his hand.

"*Mlechha*," he said quietly, without moving an inch, "my Lord Bholanath and I, we are one, we are together. We cannot be destroyed. We live for ever." He smiled.

Hammir was in no mood for discussion. With one stroke of his sword, he severed Gurudev's head from his body.

Another stride, and Hammir entered the holy sanctum, took a deep breath and snatching a heavy mace from a soldier, turned it several times around his head and struck the Lord's image with all his might.

The Image, worshipped by generations of devotees, was broken into three pieces.

* * *

The moon rose slowly into the sky. It was well past midnight. Vultures descended on the corpses in Prabhas. The dying screamed in pain. A foul smell pervaded the town.

From among the dead and injured inside the fort, a man stood up, his long hair in utter disarray. He swayed as he walked. He could hardly see. Tottering, finding his way among the corpses, he entered the assembly hall of the temple. He groped for the Lord's *Bana* (image). He could not find it. He stared around with wide open eyes. His

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hands touched the jewels gathered there. He searched for the image but failed to find it.

He came out. Suddenly his feet knocked against something. He lifted it up and tried to see what it was in the light of the moon. As he raised it, he recognised the eyes, the face, the white hair and beard of his *Guru*. With a muffled cry he threw away the head and clapped his hands over his eyes.

After a while he looked up and blinked. In his imagination, he saw the pearl-studded assembly hall, with Gurudev presiding over it. Then he shook himself, opened his eyes and looked around himself. He sobbed aloud. Claspings a marble pillar, he hit his head hard against it. He fell. Vultures hovered over his dead body.

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DISILLUSION

WITH the help of Khara and Nira, Samant and Minister Vimal brought the unconscious Bheemdev Maharaj and Chaula on board the waiting ship. Bheemdev had received many wounds, but on careful examination it was found that they were not such as would endanger his life. Everyone was greatly relieved.

All three, Ra Kamo Lakhani, Samant and Vimal discussed the situation from every angle. They came to the conclusion that Patan's strength would be seriously affected, nay eroded, unless it was made known that Bheemdev Maharaj was alive and was continuing his fight with Hammir. In order to create the impression beyond any doubt that Maharaj was well and was continuing the fight, it was decided that Ra Kamo should secretly take Bheemdev along with himself to Kutch. In the meantime, Samant and Vimal should proceed to Khambhayat, and after leaving Chaula there, should join up with Damodar Mehta and assist him in his pursuit of Hammir.

DISILLUSION

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Ever since she had left Prabhas, Chaula behaved as if she was scarcely conscious of what was happening around her. She would sit in a listless manner, and move or act like an automaton. Sometimes she would sit by Bheemdev's side like a dumb lifeless creature.

To anyone who saw her, she gave the impression of a person who had lost all vitality. Only when there was talk of Lord Somanath, would she pay any attention. If any other topic was discussed or mentioned, she, would lose all interest. She did not like anyone's company, except perhaps that of Samant. When she was told that she had to go to Khambhayat, she raised no objection. When she was informed that Bheemdev would be taken to Kanthakot in Kutch, she remained unconcerned.

Chaula, sorrowful but dry-eyed, was kept in the royal fortress at Khambhayat with the pomp and honour due to her as Bheemdev Maharaj's queen. Yet she had no interest in anything. Only a sigh escaped her lips often when she would mutter 'my Lord,' 'my Bholanath!'

When Gaganrashi came to see her, her eyes lit up momentarily. As Gurudev's disciple, he repeated to her Gurudev's last words he had heard from Samant. Chaula broke into tears.

Normally she neither spoke nor wept, but sat motionlessly with her gaze fixed on the horizon.

When Samant and Vimal came to take leave of her, she bade them goodbye listlessly. Gaganrashi would visit her

every two or three days; when he talked, she looked as if she had just awakened from a daydream.

One day Gaganrashi told her that he had established the headquarters of Pashupat sect in Khambhayat and that he proposed to build a temple of Lord Somanath there. Her face became suffused with blood, and she angrily protested: "Gaganrashi, there could not be two Bholanaths. My Bholanath is at Prabhas." Gaganrashi was astonished at her reaction, and wisely did not refer to the subject again.

On another occasion Gaganrashi talked about dancing girls. She put to him the question: "Rashiji, are the kind of clothes and ornaments I used to wear available here?"

"Of course," answered Gaganrashi with surprise. Next day, beautiful, gorgeous clothes and jewelled ornaments arrived for her. She looked happy and pleased. The palace servants in attendance were delighted to see their queen so happy for the first time.

But this happiness was all too shortlived. For some days, thereafter, she did not speak with anybody, and just sat, like a statue, her eyes fixed oceanwards. When it grew dark, she took out her newly acquired clothes and ornaments and spread them out on her bed in readiness to be put on, and then, she would sit until midnight as if she was awaiting a call from someone. Then, she would stand up, sigh deeply, and put the clothes back into their boxes. This became her regular, unalterable routine. It was scarcely surprising that this should become a topic of conversation of never-failing interest and curiosity among the palace servants.

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Gaganrashi as well as her attendants persisted in their efforts to talk to her on new subjects everyday in the hope that somehow something might arouse her interest. They told her stories of Hammir's forces having lost their enthusiasm and anxious to return to their homes; of Hammir's keenness to recapture Patan and establish himself there permanently, if his troops would obey him; that Hammir was in a confused state of mind and was advised to go back.

They conveyed to her other rumours. Lord Somanath was believed to have endowed Samant with superhuman powers and he was travelling through the length and breadth of the country. The story of Ghogha Bapa's achievements had spread in every home and wherever Samant went, he aroused fanatical enthusiasm. Lord Somanath having conferred upon him inexhaustible energy, he knew neither day nor night, neither appetite nor fatigue. He was like one possessed and his only determination was to destroy Hammir.

Then there came yet another series of tales, arousing in every Gujarati heart fresh enthusiasm and hope. The armies of Ujjain and Marwad had arrived. Samant himself had brought a contingent of the Chauhans from Sambhar. Other Rajput rulers had promised to assist Gujarat wholeheartedly and the entire area between Patan and Nulkantha was now occupied by the armies of Gujarat and their allies.

None of these stories aroused any interest in Chaula. She would merely stare vacantly at the person who recounted them and listen with patience. When he stopped speaking,

she would heave a deep sigh and turn her gaze once again towards the sea!

Two months went by in this way. One day she threw up her food. When this happened frequently in the next fortnight, she realised she had become pregnant. As soon as she realised this, she let out a scream and swooned.

When she regained consciousness, tears flowed ceaselessly from her eyes. She was not Parvati. Bheemdev was not Lord Somanath. She had not married her Lord; she had betrayed Him and succumbing to momentary infatuation, married a mere human being—and now, she was going to be the mother of his son.

Day and night she shed tears over her folly. The memory of that night when she thought she had achieved supreme happiness, now tortured every waking moment. She was impure; she who had been dedicated to Lord God, had given herself to a mere human being and in consequence had become the lowliest of the lowly. Within her she was carrying the stigma of that despicable relationship.

She had had her bed placed by the window facing the sea so that she could gaze upon the sea all the time. Every evening she would get her maids to spread out her clothes which were worn by a temple-dancer and after midnight she would have them put back.

And then things began to move on the battle-front. Every day more and more encouraging news poured in. None of these interested her.

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The armies of the Hindu rulers were marching forward. Hammir dared not return the same way, so he had decided to return to Ghazni through Kutch. He had achieved his object, succeeded in destroying Prabhas, and smashed the image of Lord Somanath, but what had he gained in substance? His adventure had ended in ashes. He was on the run, with Hindu armies in hot pursuit, led by Bheemdev and Ra Kamo Lakhani.

Came Diwali and the best news to date. Maharaj had chased Hammir out of Kutch and was returning triumphantly to Patan.

The deliriously happy people poured into Khambhayat from every direction. Every house was lit up and in the palace, drums beat to a victorious rhythm. The whole city echoed with shouts of "Victory to Bheemdev Maharaj."

The village folk wanted to see their queen Chaula, but that failed to arouse any spark of interest in her. Daily the child in her womb was growing and as it grew, she became more and more unhappy, for it reminded her of her fall from grace. She wept almost continuously; her eyes were red. Gaganrashi's medicines proved of no avail.

And then Gaganrashi, at the behest of Bheemdev Maharaj, left for Patan, and her one remaining link with life disappeared.

The people's regard for her as the queen of the great victorious warrior increased. The palace was painted anew; the staff was bustling about.

They tried to please her with dance and song, but she remained passive and unaffected. Nothing aroused any enthusiasm in her, nothing succeeded in drying her tears.

Then one day Minister Vimal came to enquire after her health. He had been sent by Bheemdev Maharaj. On Bheemdev's return to Patan, congratulations from rulers of the whole country were showered upon him. Many rulers voluntarily accepted his overlordship. Warriors from every part of the country sang his praises.

The work of reconstructing the fortress of Patan was taken in hand. Maharaj also ordered that the temple of Somanath should be rebuilt and the image of the Lord reinstalled. This task was entrusted to Gaganrashi after the status of Gurudev was conferred upon him. The new Gurudev set forth for Prabhas.

This last piece of news aroused considerable interest in Chaula. She sat up in bed, her eyes regaining some of their original lustre and brightness.

"How long will it take to reconsecrate the image of the Lord in the new temple?" she asked Gaganrashi before he left.

"About a year."

"Then I do not wish to die. Until then, my Lord, my Lord, I do not wish to die. O God, I entrust my life to Your care!"

The effort that this little conversation involved proved too much for her and she fell back unconscious.

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FROM the very next day, Chaula forced herself to sit up and eat. Her eyes began to regain some of their former brilliance. Now she did not want to die; she wanted to live!

Once again she resumed her seat by the window to gaze upon the sea. She stopped asking her maid to bring out her dancing clothes and ornaments: as before, she did this work herself.

She was now nearing her time. It was rumoured that Bheemdev Maharaj would soon be coming to see his Queen Chaula. He had become famous throughout the country, and the whole of Gujarat was madly in love with him. Everyone sang praises of him. He had driven out Hammir and had restored the greatness to Gujarat. He was rebuilding both Patan and Prabhas. His bravery could only be equalled by that of Kartikeya, the God of War. His fame was as great and as bright as that of the sun. Even the saints and gods were singing praises of him.

He was expected to arrive in Khambhayat accompanied by his senior queen Udayamati in order to see Chaula. Every house was decorated and in every street drums sounded to a victorious beat. Life in the royal fort was revitalised. The victorious warriors filled every corner of the city to welcome the great warrior Bheem, Lord of Gujarat and Conqueror of the *mlechhas*.

The night before Bheemdev's arrival was expected, Chaula became restless. In a dream, she saw Prabhas: her old and venerable Gurudev offering worship; her mother Ganga exercising her authority over the temple dancers, and herself dancing as she had done on that never-forgotten eleventh day of the moon.

In dreams, she re-established relationship with her Lord God. She became His slave, sat on His temple steps, sang devotional songs and worshipped Him with *billi* leaves. Ultimately she succeeded in winning His affections and in ecstasy spent nights with her arms around His neck.

Suddenly, she woke up, but the dreams had had their effect. Blood began to course rapidly in her veins. She was full of enthusiasm once again. The memory of her Lord awakened her longing. Anxious to meet her Lord, she listened attentively to the welcoming music of the morning. Her eyes were brilliant as before. She called her servants and with their help began to dress herself.

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About midday, Bheemdev arrived in Khambhayat accompanied by five hundred warriors. Everyone in the town assembled, dressed in his best clothes to welcome the conqueror with the auspicious red powder. In the balcony of the terrace, upon a jewelled seat sat Chaularani dressed in her best clothes and surrounded by her maids. She looked frail and feeble. Her eyes apparently were fixed on the square in the fort, but in reality they were longing to see her Lord Somanath setting out for the battlefield to destroy the Demon Tripura. Her pale cheeks were flushed and her breath came faster.

Bheemdev Maharaj was received with loud acclamation at the main palace gate. First came men of the cavalry in shining turbans. Then followed camels carrying drums and the colours. They were followed by an enormous elephant which carried a diamond-studded howdah, in which Bheemdev Maharaj was seated cross-legged. He had put on an embroidered long coat, and slung across his shoulder was his bow which had caused such havoc among the *mlechha* troops. In his ears he wore rings, his forehead was anointed with the yellow auspicious mark, on his head was a jewelled headdress whose gold bands shining brilliantly in the sun, dazzled the people's eyes. Our Bheem, our Maharaj, our great warrior, our saviour, all these thoughts made the hearts of the populace swell with pride.

Chaula too saw the lord of Gujarat, resplendent in the

howdah. She saw him as youthful as Indra, his well-trimmed beard waving in the breeze. She saw in his eyes the pride of a conqueror, on his lips the smile of a monarch. In an instant, she turned her gaze away from him, no longer interested. There was deep distress in her eyes, and her lips trembled. "Oh Mother," she cried; the next instant, she buried her head in the bolster on which she was leaning. Her whole body shook with uncontrollable sobs.

As soon as the procession halted, Bheemdev Maharaj, without waiting to divest himself of his royal robes, rushed like an impatient lover into the women's apartments to meet his beloved. He was greeted on every side by low-bowing palace attendants.

"Chaula, my Chaula," he called out as he rushed to Chaula's bed. Chaula looked at her husband with frightened eyes and softly uttered "Maharaj".

"Oh, what has become of you? How was I to know, Chaula, that you were so ill? You must get well quickly. I would have to call you to Patan if you were in better health, but I can see that you cannot bear the strain of a long journey. This last year has been wonderful. Do you remember, dearest, those unhappy days when we were married? And today we are happy. I have driven Hammir out. And do you know Chaula, Sapaldaksha, Marwad and Sthanak now pay tribute to me? Patan will become a beautiful place and I have had a really beautiful palace built for you. You will like

it. And Chaula, I have from all over the world ordered fine clothes and ornaments for you."

In his joy and eagerness, Bheemdev Maharaj spoke without stopping. Chaula, her lustreless eyes fixed upon his face, followed his words which flowed like a stream.

"Chaula, in a fortnight you will be a mother! If it is a son, that would be wonderful. My last wish will be fulfilled. After his birth, you must come to Patan. I will send for you or send Vimal to bring you. He is very fond of you. I may not be able to come myself. I may have to invade Malwa, whose ruler Bhoj has been making a lot of trouble for me. He must be taught a lesson."

Poor lovelorn Bheemdev did not realise that every word he uttered was hurting his beloved. He was so overwhelmed with emotion that he came close to her, took her face in his hands and kissed her warmly.

Chaula felt the world around her swaying and tottering. To her, Bheemdev's face, the smell of his body; the soft touch of his scented beard, the passion in his eyes, seemed to belong to a stranger shockingly distasteful. With her eyes shut, shaking in every limb, she could scarcely bear being fondled. She silently prayed: "My Lord Somanath, why have You forsaken me? Why have You forgotten me?"

Bheemdev's desire to talk was great. He continued: "Chaula, do you know that Samant Chauhan will be here

soon? He is a wonderful boy. Instead of coming with me in pomp and splendour, he wants to steal in the fortress like a thief! But Chaula, shall I tell you something? You must not tell anybody. If Hammir has run away, that is not because of me, but because of Samant. Day and night he has travelled from one kingdom to another, and persuaded ruler after ruler to join me. Damodar Mehta is never tired of singing his praises. Had Samant not been there, we would have been massacred in Patan.

“And dear Chaula, if the two of us are alive today, that too is because of him. Had he not been in Prabhas at the critical moment, who would have brought us here? But he is a foolish boy. I told him that I would appoint him Dandanayak of Sorath; I even offered him a small kingdom, but he is quite firm. He says that now his duty is done, he must go back to his Ghoghagadh. What is there in Ghoghagadh? Nothing. I shall send him to you. You must try and persuade him. If he remains with us, he will add to the glory of Gujarat.”

“Maharaj,” at long last Chaula mustered sufficient courage to put the question she had been longing to ask: “When will Prabhas be ready?”

“In about eight months.”

“May I go there after our child is born?”

“How can you? Don’t you want to come to Patan? We shall have a very good time together.”

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"But my heart is in Prabhas. I want to offer worship to my Lord Somanath."

"I am building a most beautiful temple for Him. We shall go to Patan to perform the ceremony of consecrating His new *Bana* (image)."

"A new *Bana*? What happened to the image of my Lord?" asked Chaula in surprise.

"Don't you know, it was destroyed by Hammir. And he has taken away 'the pieces to Garjan.'"

A sudden change came over Chaula. She looked around like a trapped animal. Maharaj was astonished and frightened and shouted for the maids. By the time they arrived, Chaula had lost consciousness.

The following day Samant came to see her. He was lean and stern, disfigured by wounds, burning with an inner fire, looking forbidding and fierce. He entered the room and stood transfixed. For a while he looked at the wasted form of Chaula.

"Noble Mahadevi, greetings," he bowed to her from a distance and folded his hands.

"Chauhan, why greet me in this manner?" she exclaimed as tears rolled down on her cheeks.

"Why, what is the matter?"

"Nothing," replied Chaula, highly agitated. "Brave Chauhan, so you too have forgotten Chaula?"

Samant's face became gentle. He came closer to Chaula and folding his two hands, said: "How can I forget you? But the whole world has changed since we last met. What was I to do?"

"It is quite true, Samant. Prabhas has been destroyed. Ganga is dead. Gurudev too. Lord Somanath's image has been smashed to pieces and I, the one dedicated to the Lord, why should I have been left alive?" Chaula asked, her bosom heaving with suppressed sobs.

Samant's heart was deeply touched by Chaula's misery. "Chaula," said he very gently, "I understand everything—everything. I too have lost all I had—Ghogha Bapa, my whole family, Gurudev none remains."

Only those who have suffered can understand one another. Samant and Chaula felt instinctively how the other felt.

"Samant," cried Chaula, "you too are leaving me."

"What can I do? I belong to the days when Ghogha Bapa and Gurudev lived. In the new world that I now see around me, I am a stranger, an outsider. No one understands me."

"Chauhan, I don't belong to them either. Once before—was it in an earlier birth?—you had asked me to place upon your forehead the auspicious mark of victory. May I ask you to give me something in return?"

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"By all means, my dear sister. Tell me what you want."

"Will you stay here until my Lord is re-shrined in Prabhas?" she implored, "of course, if I am then alive."

Samant remembered the occasion when Chaula had impressed upon his forehead the red mark of victory; also the sweet conversation they had had that night. He recollected how he had, as a brother, given her away in marriage to Bheemdev.

"All right, Chaula, I promise."

"Samant, my brother, may you live for a hundred years!"

A pleasant smile played upon Chaula's face. Samant, who had seen nothing of happiness or joy or peace for months past, responded with a smile. The two lonely hearts felt that their burden of sorrow had been lightened.

52.

AMONG THE RUINS

A MONTH later, Chaula Devi gave birth to a son, heir-apparent to Bheemdev's throne. There was great rejoicing in Khambhayat, Patan, in the whole of Gujarat. Maharaj was extremely happy. He came posthaste to Khambhayat, saw and fondled his infant son, and gave generous presents to everyone in attendance on Chaula.

Chaula was his most beloved wife and queen. She had given birth to a prince. Bheemdev's cup of happiness was full.

When she gave birth to a son, she showed no inclination to see her first-born. But when she did see him, she was shocked; he had the same broad chest, the same big eyes as his father's. She felt faint as if she had seen a terrifying giant in an ugly dream. To her, who had been dedicated to Mahadev, the God of Gods, this child was a living reminder of her fatal lapse.

Two months later, Minister Vimal came to escort her

to Patan. There was no reasonable excuse now to put off her departure. She made herself ready and was carried in a palanquin to Patan.

When she arrived in Patan, the capital of Gujarat, she was installed in the apartments of the royal palace reserved for the queens. Queen Udayamati, tall and beautiful, with the typical pointed Rajput nose, and looking every inch the consort of the great Rajput warrior Bheemdev, visited her. Everyone was most anxious to show the utmost consideration to Chaula and to satisfy her smallest wish.

Chaula had begun steadily to regain her health, but in the pomp and splendour of the capital's life, she did not feel at home as she had felt in Khambhayat. There at least was the ocean and the distant horizon beyond which her imagination could locate Prabhas, the home of her Lord. There she was not surrounded by such a large retinue of people, waited upon by so many maids, nor was there another Maharani. Indeed, on the very first day she was in Patan, she had the inexplicable feeling that though outwardly everyone was respectful, she was really regarded as a lowly outsider. She admitted to herself with clenched teeth that she was neither a blue-blooded princess nor a Rajput, but only a temple dancer. What right had she to be there? Such thoughts filled her already afflicted heart.

Bheemdev Maharaj, who had been eagerly looking forward to Chaula's arrival, quickly finished his day's work.

Every fibre of his being was alive. His imagination went back to the terrible yet delightful night when he and Chaula had come together under the gentle light of the moon on a narrow bed in a small and comfortless room. That was also the night when he had had surprising conversation with Samant which was followed by the marriage ceremony. She was the centre of that glorious episode.

He found Chaula sewing pearls to her dancer's clothes. She looked in that dark room like the moon peeping through the clouds.

"Chaula, what are you doing?"

She looked up and fixed her lustreless eyes on Maharaj as she replied: "I am sewing pearls on my clothes."

"You? Where are your maid-servants? And why these clothes?"

"These are my dancer's outfit. If the maid-servants were to touch them, they would be desecrated."

"Oh," rejoined Maharaj with a smile. "I hear that you make new clothes every night. Is this a new dress?"

Chaula nodded her head.

"Isn't it odd for the Queen of Patan to be concerned with the clothes of a dancing girl?"

Chaula jumped up, anger bringing glow to her pale face. "Maharaj, I was a dancing girl and I shall remain

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one—dedicated to my Lord.” Her voice trembled as she spoke.

Bheemdev had no desire to waste this beautiful evening in a meaningless quarrel, and gave in immediately: “Chaula, my mistake. The temple dancer has brought honour and beauty to my throne. Come, my dearest.” Bheemdev took a step forward and stretched out his arms to draw Chaula to himself.

She watched with angry eyes as Maharaj approached her, love writ large on his face. When his hands touched her, she was transfixed like one hypnotised by a snake. The blood drained away from her face and every hair on her body stood on end. She put out her hands protectively and let out a long scream.

“Chaula, what is the matter?” asked Maharaj, bewildered.

“No, please don’t touch me,” she made her feelings known at last.

“What is the matter? Why are you behaving in this manner?” Bheemdev asked anxiously, unable to fathom the reason for Chaula’s strange behaviour.

Chaula folded her hands as if in supplication and in a tearful, choking voice urged: “Maharaj, no, no, not tonight, please.”

“Why, what is wrong with you today?”

"My Lord Somanath" She could say nothing more and burst into tears.

"Have you taken a vow?"

"Yes," replied Chaula seizing at the excuse Maharaj had unwittingly provided her. "The image of Lord Somanath has not yet been consecrated."

"Oh," said Bheemdev smilingly. "Now I understand. But why should you have taken such a vow? Why did you not think of my feelings? Why did you not consult me?"

"Maharaj, we met in the shrine of my Lord Somanath, and it was his image that was smashed into little pieces." As she said this, she wept uncontrollably.

"Chaula, do not distress yourself. You wait. I shall have such a wonderful temple constructed, and we shall have the Lord's image consecrated with such pomp and ceremony, you will be delighted. I will invite kings from all over the country."

"When will that be?" asked Chaula.

"Naturally when the whole work of construction is completed."

Here was a ray of hope for Chaula. "Maharaj, please send me there. Let me be engaged in that task."

"You?"

"Yes, I, the temple dancer," replied Chaula eagerly.

"Dear, foolish girl! You are the Queen of Gujarat. Why should you still think of yourself as a dancer?" Maharaj said fondly. Chaula's reaction was totally unexpected. She felt as if she had been publicly slapped. She felt humiliated, and in utter distress wailed: "Do please send me to Prabhas."

"But Chaula, if you go, will I not be very lonely?"

"But think of my vow," Chaula whispered, raising her hands in supplication once again.

Bheemdev was passionately attached to Chaula; he was deeply in love with his gentle lotus-like young wife of his. He could not bring himself to deny her wish. He said generously, "My darling, if you ask something of me, how can I say no? Go and fulfil your vow. That night we had come together when we had conquered the enemy. We shall meet again as soon as we have consecrated Lord Somanath's image in the presence of all the rulers of this continent. We shall then make up for this long wait to which we are condemning ourselves."

Chaula bent and touched Bheemdev's feet. "Maharaj, you are merciful indeed. How shall I ever repay you for so much kindness? I am no more than a pebble thrown up by a roaring sea." She managed to hold back the tears which welled in her eyes.

Bheemdev Maharaj's beloved queen went to Prabhas to supervise the construction of the temple of Somanath.

She was accompanied by an army of servants—men and women. Royal physicians were deputed to look after her and the little Prince Kshemraj. Bheemdev Maharaj accompanied her part of the way. Damodar Mehta, who was a great devotee of Lord Somanath; was deputed to see her right up to Prabhas. This pious Brahmin Minister was himself anxious to get the temple completed expeditiously.

When she set out on her journey to Prabhas, Chaula was full of enthusiasm, but it did not last long. On her arrival at Prabhas, what she saw was a new, tall, broad and massive fortress under construction. She saw new roads being built and wells dug. She saw bazaars springing up and new temples of the latest design beginning to come up. She saw Gaganrashi's *ashram*, built more like a royal palace than an *ashram*, and Maharaj's own palace, a smaller edition of the palace at Patan. Where formerly there were the abodes of the temple dancers, houses were being built for the Brahmins.

The temple of Lord Somanath had already made good progress. It had a large *shikhar* but of a different design from that of the former temple; unlike the old temple, it had no balconies, balconies in which, in former days, she loved to sit and daydream.

This was a new though beautiful world, being created by some unknown architect, but it was not anything like the

abode of Lord Somanath as she knew it. When she entered the palace that had been reserved for her, she felt herself a prisoner in an unfamiliar atmosphere. It made her feel lonely and sad. Just as frost covers the land, sadness enveloped her heart. And it was this sadness that influenced all her feelings and emotions and her actions in Prabhas.

Like a ghost walking about on the earth, seeking to fulfil in this birth its half-satisfied desires in the previous life, Chaula moved about in this welter of stones, bricks, lime, workers, carpenters and labourers.

Somehow, she sought to create among these unfamiliar and strange buildings what was deeply engraved in her own heart. Here she had played as a child. There Ganga had punished her when she could not keep time to the music. There she had sung and danced rhythmically. There Gurudev had upbraided her.

There again it was that she had quarrelled with Kundla. And there—the palace of lights which was under construction—was where she had first met Bheemdev.

The original temple of Tripurasundari was small and enclosed by walls. On that very site, was now being constructed a large temple of Mahamaya.

In an open courtyard the quarters for Gaganrashi Sarvagna and his disciples were constructed. This was the site of the terrace where, under the illusion that she was

marrying Lord Somanath, she had given herself to the King of Patan.

When finally she came near the inner temple where Lord Somanath was to be consecrated, emotion overwhelmed her and she became nearly unconscious. Brick, mortar and stones became invisible. She saw once again in her imagination the great courtyard in which Ganga and Gurudev were preparing the fire for her to immolate herself.

The inner sanctum was still under construction. She found that there was just empty space where once stood the image of Lord Somanath, her Beloved. The image of her Lord who had brought about peace between Brahma and Vishnu was no longer there. She was like the last human being alive in a world destroyed; she cast her eyes about in sheer hopelessness and cried and cried as if her heart would break.

53.

“TONIGHT, YES, TONIGHT”

THE sun rose and set regularly. Temples and buildings rose steadily higher, stone by stone. Market places began to hum with life again.

However, Chaula felt as if she was living in the land of ghosts. Nothing around her seemed to be real nor anyone belonged to her world, none of the buildings hers. This Prabhas was not the abode of her Lord. Gurudev was not hers. Gaganrashi, the present Sarvagna, was nothing but a pretender, dressed up impertinently in the silk robes of his Gurudev.

The world in which she lived was in her heart. In that world, temple bells were heard; Gang Sarvagna conducted his worship; Ganga taught singing and dancing to the girls, as before; she danced and sang and sought to please Lord Somanath, worshipping with *billi* leaves. In this shadowy world of hers, she came alive, wide awake.

In the world of reality, she only walked, ate and worked mechanically. Her sole interest was when she worked on

her dancing clothes, embroidering them and sewing on diamonds, pearls and rubies in wonderful designs and craftsmanship. Beyond this, life held no other interest for her.

After a time her maid-servants gave up taking interest in her. They were not sure whether she was sane, but curiously they were all afraid of her; she seemed to carry with her an atmosphere of gloom.

In the evening when it was time to offer worship to God, Chaula would wake up with a start and begin to take notice of her surroundings. She would fondly spread out the clothes she had been working on all day on her bed, and gaze upon them for long. Her one desire was to wear those beautiful clothes to please her Beloved and pray for His forgiveness. Memories of that unforgettable eleventh day of the moon came back to her, when she had danced before Lord Somanath, when He had made her His own. Some day, once again, in the presence of Gang Sarvagna, she would offer everything to the Lord once and for all.

If she heard the sound of a distant conch or the tinkling of little bells around a bull's neck, her heart leaped in delight. Like a little child she would turn to look out of the window only to discover that these were the figment of her imagination. She would then burst into tears.

"No. He will not come back. My Lord will not come

back to me." With these despairing words she would roll on the ground as if she was mad and tear her hair and wail. She had become impure! She forgot her Beloved and lived as the wife of a mortal! Her Lord had become angry with her. He would never come back to her, never forgive her! She would remain in despair; often she would lose consciousness. Such was her daily life.

And whenever the infant Prince Kshemraj was with her, she felt that a knife was turned into an old, unhealed wound. Each day he looked more and more like his father Bheemdev!

Days went by. Chaula lived for only one moment, the moment when her Lord would come back to her, and forgiving her, would take her back to Himself. But months passed, seasons came and went, yet that happy moment never arrived! Her patience was becoming exhausted. Daily she persisted in laying out her dancing clothes, so that she could put them on the moment her Lord came, but her Lord never came and her hopes remained smothered in her heart.

And then came the month of Asvin, the last month of the lunar year. The fifteenth day of the first half of the month when it was full-moon, was fixed for consecrating the image of Lord Somanath in the new shrine.

Bheemdev Maharaj's invitations were sent out far and wide; the rulers from every part of the country began to

arrive in Prabhas. More than ever before, the streets of Prabhas became alive with people. The merchants were busy in their shops; *mantras* were recited in every Brahmin's house. From all over the country, pilgrims came in a steady stream.

Gagan Sarvagna, now the head of the Lakulesh sect, inaugurated the sacrificial ceremonial of Maha Rudra. Trumpets were sounded, drums beaten, flags unfurled from the top of the fort of Prabhas. Thanks to the efforts of Bheemdev, the great archer and destroyer of the invaders, Prabhas had once again become a place of pilgrimage more magnificent than before.

Chaula, standing on the balcony of her palace, gazed far away where the ocean surged. The shouts of 'Jaya Somanath' all around her seemed to give a special meaning and urgency to her daydreams.

Bheemdev Maharaj arrived, accompanied by his feudatories and ministers and followed by his triumphant army. The whole of Prabhas went out to receive him joyously. Gagan Sarvagna, the new *Guru*, gave him a welcome befitting a great conqueror. Bheemdev, the head of the Chalukya clan, gave generous sums in charity. But Chaula's dream remained unrealised.

In the royal palace, Bheemdev's heart was overflowing with pride. Today was the day when his glory had reached

its zenith. Poets had greeted him as the man who had destroyed the *mlechhas*, as a hero of incomparable bravery. They sang of his devotion to the new shrine, beautiful as a pearl, risen on the shores of the sea.

In the Age of Truth, Soma had founded this great temple. Ravana had reconstructed it in *Treta* Age and Sri Krishna in the *Dwapara* Age. And now, he, the great Chalukya, had rebuilt it in *Kaliyuga*.

Bheemdev Maharaj walked into the women's apartments, proud of his achievements, resplendent in jewel-studded dress. Soon the consecration of Lord Somanath would be accomplished, his beloved Chaula would fulfil her vow and the great happiness that had been his on the last day's battle would be his, until the end of his life.

It was in this frame of mind that he entered Chaula's room, but when his eyes beheld her, he was taken aback. His beloved queen looked like someone belonging to another world.

"Chaula," he at last managed to say with a smile, "today is the greatest day in our life. Today I will have the image of Lord Somanath re-consecrated. The whole Bharat will resound with my glory. This ancient temple, founded by the Lord of the Moon, will now be re-established by me."

"Maharaj," Chaula spoke in a sad and scarcely audible voice, "I too have been anxiously awaiting this moment. I

am waiting for my Lord Somanath to re-occupy His proper place, for his worship to be resumed, when I can have the supreme joy once again of dancing before Him."

"Dance!" exclaimed Bheemdev shocked at the suggestion. "You seem to forget you are a queen! Why should you dance?"

Over Chaula's eyes there came a shadow of apprehension. It was the same hungry look she had seen in his eyes once before in Khambhayat, and seeing it again, she was unnerved.

He had much work still to do; the time for consecration was fast approaching. He did not want anything to upset him and destroy his pleasant and happy frame of mind. He laughed bravely in an attempt to keep up his own enthusiasm and observed: "Wait, Kshemraj's mother, let us not be in a hurry. Tonight, when your vow will have been accomplished, I shall come to greet you. You must prepare my bed as you had done on that never-to-be-forgotten day." He laughed once again, trying to hide the fear that was tugging at his heart.

Chaula put her hands to her throat as if she was being strangled. The pain was unbearable. With trembling lips, she whispered, "Tonight, tonight, yes, tonight." But Bheemdev did not tarry to realise the significance of the words.

54.

THE LAST DANCE

THE sun was about to set. Chaula and Samant were seated opposite each other in the women's apartment. They were both looking out of the window.

Chaula was confiding her innermost thoughts to Samant. She spoke in a soft voice: "My heart is oppressed by all kinds of fears. Gurudev and Ganga have been talking to me since the morning. They are both reassuring me that my Lord God will not desert me. My Beloved will take me back just as I am.....

"I am a simple girl. My Bholanath will not forget me—cannot have forgotten me. He knows that I belong to Him, that I am the dust of His feet. He knows me as I am, impure or pure. Chauhan, my brother, a new hope fills my heart today. I shall get peace at last. Since the morning, I keep hearing the sound of the bells around Nandi's neck.... Today He will forgive me and take me back as I am."

Chaula burst into tears. "I have done nothing that would justify my Lord spurning me. Chauhan, He is full of mercy

and I am only an insignificant creature. If He will not help me, who will?"

"Chaula, I too keep seeing Ghoghagadh before my eyes!"

"Valiant Chauhan, help me. I shall ever remain indebted to you, both in this world and the next."

For a while, Samant silently watched Chaula shedding tears of despair. For an instant, the lines of sadness on her drawn face vanished and he saw instead the soft, childlike face of that youthful dancer who had come to put the red mark of victory on his forehead. He had achieved victory and rescued his country, but in the process, he had used up every ounce of his energy. Now this thin strand which bound him to life was pleading for help. Should he refuse it?

He was a lonely soul on the earth. The one great force in his life was his deep affection for Chaula. Why should he care for anyone else's opinion? What had he to do with prestige and honour? What was Bheemdev to him? Of what concern were fame, wealth and kingdom to him? He was like a little grain of desert sand.

By the grace of his God, he became His instrument to fight the foreign invader, the destroyer of His shrine. Lord Somanath was re-consecrated; he would once again be transformed into that same little grain of sand. His camels were ready. Immediately after the evening prayers, he would be on his way to the desert. He must take the way his

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forefathers had taken. Why should he not heed Chaula's request?

He made up his mind at once.

He stood up and, tightening the cloth wound around his waist, said: "Chaula, I am your slave. I shall do what you wish. I shall come at the time of the evening prayers" — his voice reflected the deep love that he bore for her.

Chaula's face blushed with joy.

"Chauhan, I shall be ready."

* * *

It was time for the evening worship. Thousands of little lights gleamed in the central courtyard in front of the inner temple, and their light was reflected brightly from hundreds of gem-studded pillars.

The sanctum was more beautiful and larger than the old one and this made it easier to see the image of Lord Shankar from the courtyard itself. It was anointed with sandal-wood paste, covered with *billi* leaves; it was beautiful and impressive. Water fell drop by drop upon the image from a golden pot suspended from the ceiling. From every corner, lanterns of gold shed their light into the sanctum.

In the assembly hall, seats were reserved for ruling princes. On the right hand side of the door leading to the sanctum was seated Bheemdev Maharaj. By his side was seated Wakpatiraj of Jhallor, twirling his white moustaches with the air of a young man. Next to him sat Baldev Chauhan

of Sapaldaksha, a hero of a hundred battles, Dhundhiraj of Abu and Mukunddev of Sthanak. Beside them sat the rulers of Kutch and Sorath, and a number of other high-ranking officers.

The sacrifices made by so many rulers in driving out Hammir were being rewarded today. At last, Lord Shambhu, eternal and omnipotent, had been re-established in His home, wiping off the suffering and distress of the past, converting them into happy memories.

As soon as the conch was blown, everybody stood up. Gagan Sarvagna, on his wooden sandals, walked in. He had a tiger-skin wrapped around his body, and was gently stroking his long, black beard. There was some similarity in the way in which he bore himself and the way Gurudev, his predecessor in office, walked and talked. He responded smilingly to greetings from all sides as he entered the sanctum to offer worship.

Gagan Sarvagna took in his hands the jewel-studded *aarti* lamp, a gift for Lord Shambhu from the ruler of Kashmir. Everyone present stood up and sang in chorus the hymn of evening prayer.

When it was over, Gagan Sarvagna shouted: "Victory to Somanath—Jaya Somanath." It was taken up by the rulers, by the assemblage gathered there and finally by the crowds which had collected outside the temple. Then it echoed from house to house. The whole Prabhas was one huge temple.

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Then followed complete silence. Gagan Sarvagna took his seat and directed: "Let the ceremonial dance begin." The disciples passed on the order, repeating the words: "The dance may begin." Then someone called out: "The dancer is not ready, nor are the musicians."

Several minutes passed. The princes looked at one another in bewilderment. Gagan Sarvagna's forehead showed signs of puzzled irritation.

Suddenly, however, the gentle sound of anklets on a dancer's feet was heard and behind it that of the team of musicians. The dancer entered the assembly hall by a side door, enveloped in dazzling radiance created by her ornaments and clothes embroidered with precious stones.

She came in slowly as if she could walk with difficulty. She had covered her face almost completely with a gold-embroidered scarf.

"Let the dance begin," repeated Gagan Sarvagna.

Then the dancer's feet began to move more firmly. The music soon became faster and with it her footwork. The singers began the classic episode in which Parvati woos the Lord. The dancer joined in the singing, but in a soft and trembling voice which hardly, anyone could hear.

The pace of the dance increased with the rhythm of the music; the dancer, by her *mudras* (stylised gestures of her hand) showing picking up flowers, preparing a garland and taking a handful of *billi* leaves.

With quickly dancing feet, she approached the door of the sanctum to offer worship. She joined her hands, bowed her head, prostrated herself before the image. She offered worship to the Lord with her *mudras* and movements.

In their desire to see what the dancer's face looked like, the rulers became impatient. The other girls stopped their singing; they could not understand what kind of uncommon dance was being performed. Only the drum continued with its rhythmic beats and the dancing girl's feet kept time with it. The whole assembly was soon hypnotised by this marvellous dance. Everybody watched with bated breath its amazing movements and pace.

The dancer went on with her worship. With gestures she pleaded to Lord Shiva, again and again. She danced round and round Him in prayerful supplication. From every limb of her little body flowed astonishing grace and beauty.

The sad song which she sang in a low voice, charged with intense emotion, was taken up by the singing girls. She sought to placate Lord Shankar—to make Him smile—to ask His forgiveness. Disappointed at His unresponsiveness, she fell back and returned with hesitant feet.

Bheemdev Maharaj, like a man insane, his eyes wide open, petrified in his seat, watched the slender figure—which he felt as familiar—and the dance and its amazing pattern and convolutions. Gagan Sarvagna's eyes expressed an apprehension; there was something uncanny with this dancer.

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The dancer continued her effort to placate Lord Shankar. She made one more effort. Her dance poured forth the anguish in her heart. The sound of her anklets was more like convulsive sobs. No one could distinguish whether the sobbing that was heard emerged from the musical instruments or from the dancer's throat! All present were moved to tears.

The dancer came quite close to the door of the sanctum. This was her last effort to please Lord Shankar. In utter despair, she placed her head on the ground. Her movements indicated that she was offering herself to Lord Shankar.

The tempo of the dance slackened. The music became soft and then stopped. The dancer bent low.

Suddenly she stood up. It seemed from her joyous movements that Lord Shiva was pleased. She jumped in ecstasy; the way she gesticulated, combined with the rapid beat of her ankleted feet, expressed her triumph. The music was resumed. The delirious crowd now watched every development, every movement, in dead silence.

As the dancer made one last triumphant gesture, the cloth which covered her face fell off. On that pale but beautiful face was to be seen the light of ethereal happiness, her eyes, glowing bright with love.

Before the movement was over, she jumped towards the sanctum and placed her head on its threshold.

The drums stopped; the anklets no longer tinkled.

The dancer's head slid lifelessly from the threshold; her limp body fell in a heap.

Bheemdev grew red with fury as he recognised his beloved queen in the dancer. To vindicate the honour of his family, he attempted to draw his sword from its scabbard. Gagan Sarvagna stood up and stopped him with a gesture of his hand and rushed to the fallen dancer.

Chaula had made the supreme sacrifice of her life to Lord Somanath.

In the unbroken silence a sob was heard. A gaunt warrior was seen to rush out, pushing aside everyone, and disappear into the darkness.



THE AUTHOR

Kanaiyalal Maneklal Munshi was a man of great versatility and unique achievements. He was an eminent lawyer, and (a seasoned statesman) one of the framers of India's Constitution. Coming under the inspiring influence of Sri Aurobindo during his student days, Munshi fought ardently for India's freedom. He worked in close association with Jinnah, Tilak, Besant, Mahatma Gandhi, Sardar Patel and Pandit Nehru. His achievements as Home Minister of Bombay in 1937, India's Agent-General in Hyderabad before the Police Action, India's Food Minister and as Governor of Uttar Pradesh, were characterized by rare courage and decisive energy.

Acknowledged during his lifetime as the foremost writer in modern Gujarati literature, his literary output was vast and varied and included novels, dramas, memoirs and historical books in Gujarati. He also wrote several historical and other works in English, notably *Gujarat and Its Literature*, *Imperial Gujarat*, *Bhagavad Gita and Modern Life*, *Creative Art of Life*, *To Badrinath*, *Saga of Indian Sculpture*, *The End of An Era*, *Bhagawan Parashurama*, *Tapasvini* and *Prithvi Vallabh*.

Jaya Somanath deals with the story of the epic heroism of Bheemdev and the transcendental love of the temple dancer Chaula, for the brave warrior and was originally written in Gujarati by Munshiji. The entire novel, as translated into English by Shri H. M. Patel, I.C.S. (Retd.), was serialised in the *Bhavan's Journal*. The novel is now being brought out in book form for the benefit of wide readership.

